



# The Fatal Decisions

*With a commentary by  
Lieutenant-General Siegfried Westphal*

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GENERAL OF THE AIR FORCE  
WERNER KREIPE

GENERAL  
GÜNTHER BLUMENTRITT

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL  
FRITZ BAYERLEIN

COLONEL-GENERAL  
KURT ZEITZLER

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL  
BODO ZIMMERMAN

GENERAL  
HASO VON MANTEUFFEL

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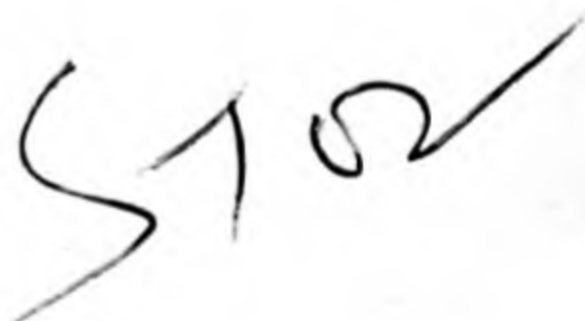
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# Introduction

BY CYRIL FALLS

*Sometime Chichele Professor of the  
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SINCE the Second World War most of the best unofficial military literature on the subject has come from German officers. The work of Guderian, Rommel, and Mellenthin, to name only three of the writers, is of a high standard, not only from the individual point of view, but also as a contribution to the general history of the war. This symposium, *The Fatal Decisions*, seems to me equally well written—though there is some natural variation in the literary skill of seven contributors—and more important than its predecessors.

Two reproaches have been addressed to the writers of such books. The first is that they are so obsessed by the technicalities of strategy, tactics, and armament that they fail to see the picture as a whole: conflicts of ideals, human passions, racial frenzies, economic stresses, geographical influences. I do not find this criticism useful. If you want that sort of book you go to sages, let us say to a Toynbee. I admit that the combination of a Guderian and a Toynbee is not wholly inconceivable. It may produce a Clausewitz. That type, perhaps happily, does not grow on blackberry bushes. The ordinary soldier is an instrument. He writes of the problems he and his colleagues have had to face. He provides something the sage cannot produce. Indeed, the sage writing on war can be maddening because his generalizations neglect technical considerations—in other words, ways and means—to such an extent that even in his own field his conclusions may be false. Here I think Lieutenant-General Westphal, though one of these scrubby technicians, has touched on deeper issues with some success.

The second charge is more formidable. It is that the German generals have shovelled responsibility for disaster on to the shoulders of Hitler and again and again alleged that he butted in to spoil their strategy and tactics. This charge has often been well founded. In truth, Hitler's interventions were often disastrous, but sometimes they were beneficial and on occasion they made no real difference. The importance attributed to the first type



by the contributors to *The Fatal Decisions* varies, but, all in all, I should not call it excessively exaggerated. General Blumentritt tells us that he and others on the spot were horrified by the order to stand fast after the defeat in front of Moscow—and goes on to acknowledge that it was correct. A withdrawal—after, not before, the last desperate thrust for Moscow—would have led to far greater loss. Moreover, on a general view of Hitler's leadership in Russia, we must recognize that under it the invaders came out without having suffered complete ruin, whereas under Napoleon's they did not. The more Hitler's power is stressed, the more significant this historical fact becomes.

I propose to examine one episode in some detail. Here, as in several cases, our official historians have more information than the German generals because we have got the most important of the German records. The instance is the decision of May 23rd, 1940, to close up armour on the "Canal front" before continuing the offensive and the order not to use the armoured divisions against Dunkirk. It does not come into any of the six essays on phases of the war, but it is mentioned by General Westphal in his interpolated commentary. He follows previous writers in asserting that the British Expeditionary Force 'was in an untenable position, from which it was saved only by a decision of Hitler's.' I am sure he is sincere in this view, but I would point out that the affair is susceptible of a different interpretation for which there is strong German evidence.

Most of the special information to which I have alluded is open to our official historians only. It is on one of them that I am drawing, Major L. F. Ellis, author of *The War in France and Flanders, 1939-1940*. Rundstedt had had a talk with Kluge, commanding the Fourth Army, on the morning of May 23rd. That evening the war diary of the Army recorded that it would 'in the main, halt to-morrow in accordance with Colonel-General von Rundstedt's order.' No Hitler here. He turned up next day, however, and agreed. He was, says Jodl, 'very happy about the measures of the Army Group,' but he had not initiated them. Brauchitsch, Rundstedt's superior, had indeed desired to press on with the encirclement of Dunkirk, but by the time Hitler arrived the Fourth Army was definitely stopped on the Canal line, for the 24th anyhow. Early on the 25th the high command (O.K.H.) authorized the passage of the Canal line by the armour, but Rundstedt did not send it over. Here Rundstedt, with Hitler's



approval, opposed the view of the Commander-in-Chief, Brauchitsch. To pursue the story, Hitler did butt in on the 26th and it was to authorize 'a forward thrust by armoured groups and infantry divisions in the direction Tournai-Cassel-Dunkirk.'

Again, the order that the Panzer divisions should not be used for close fighting in the attack on Dunkirk fulfilled the tactical doctrine of the campaign and had here a special reinforcing factor in its favour: not only the built-up area which Hitler disliked but waterways, criss-cross ditches, and inundations. If we confine ourselves to Rundstedt's knowledge at the time and put out of the reckoning the easy victory over the French which was to come, we can readily see why he wanted to treat his armour tenderly. It had suffered considerable losses in material and seemed to have a lot of work ahead of it. The tanks were 'to rest, to be ready for tasks in the south.'

I do not argue that if the Fourth Army's armour had been driven straight ahead the British would have avoided a disaster. I do not pretend to know what might have happened. But I suggest that the evidence against the story of Hitler's decision saving the B.E.F. is pretty formidable.

On the other hand, some of Hitler's decisions seem to me to be those of a madman, and that as early as the end of 1942. With all respect to the other contributors, none of whose work lacks merit, it is Part Four of this compilation which has gripped me most closely and which enthralled me as I read. This is Colonel-General Zeitzler's 'Stalingrad.' The author has been reproached by some other officers with not having displayed sufficient force of character in his efforts to keep Hitler on the rails. If these efforts were as he depicts them he has been unjustly treated.

Day after day he pressed his plan to save the threatened forces or propounded new plans—if Hitler would not swallow the best and most obvious, a modification might at least save something from the wreck. He called on all the evidence he could muster. He saw to it that the witnesses spoke the truth. And he did make more impression than he realized at the time—or than Hitler himself realized—but it was always too little and too late. We can almost hear that horrible hoarse yell: 'I won't leave the Volga! I won't go back from the Volga!' Perhaps it is too easy for us to say that the best means of avoiding such an experience was not to serve such a master, but it is a comment which comes readily to our minds.



Regarding Stalingrad we can be more positive in our conception of the might-have-been than in the case of Dunkirk. A serious and humiliating defeat would have had to be stomached in any event, but there can be no doubt about the possibility of withdrawing the Sixth Army and many other troops in time to avoid envelopment. And Stalingrad was possibly the worst disaster suffered by Germany in the course of the war because it brought about losses which were never wholly replaced.

Psychologically, the case is interesting. Hitler possessed a vivid imagination, but he also had the infernal power of blacking out all that he did not want to see, in particular all that was shameful. The frightful miseries of the Sixth Army must have been present in some pocket of his consciousness, but it was sealed off. General Zeitzler, on the other hand, though not an eye-witness of the tragedy, was aware of it through his professional knowledge, fortified by imagination in the interpretation of the reports which he received. He brings it home to the reader with remarkable force and clarity. It must be added that he has some generous words for the unfortunate Rumanians involved in the débâcle. Generosity was a sentiment unknown to the Führer.

But enough of Hitler. He certainly plays a big part in this book, but it would still be of high interest without his presence. Its title, *The Fatal Decisions*, does not refer exclusively to his decisions, or indeed to those of any individual. I take it to be broader in meaning, to include individual decisions, but also those military decisions which are reached by the verdict of arms or made inescapable by events. The entry of the United States into the war is one of the most overwhelming of events, but, though Hitler is here condemned for declaring war on the United States, it is hard to believe that this decision made much difference. In all respects, however, the entry of the United States into the war was a fatal decision for Germany, by reason not only of the fighting power and potential of the United States, but also—and to start with most of all—as a result of the arms and equipment poured into Russia. Again, the decision to abandon *Sealion*, the invasion of Britain, was not in any real sense an individual decision, but due to a train of events, chief among them the defeat of the Luftwaffe by the Royal Air Force. Certain factors in this defeat are complex and spread over a long period. They include not only German lack of readiness to strike, hesitations, differing views of the three fighting services, but also pre-war German aircraft con-



## INTRODUCTION

struction, the ideas behind it, even military doctrine. Where blame there is, its apportionment is not easy or likely to command general assent. Yet this also was a critical defeat for Germany.

The reader's temperament will decide which contributions afford him most interest. He may look for operations which concern his own country, or even himself if he was a combatant, most closely, in which case he will be attracted by Lieutenant-General Fritz Bayerlein's 'El Alamein.' For myself, I prefer to cover ground with which I am less familiar and always find a peculiar fascination in the Russian campaigns. Yet Alamein and its background must always provide one of the most stimulating episodes of the war, as it is one of the most vital because the essential preliminary to the West's passage to the offensive and the invasion of German-occupied Europe. Incidentally, it was a German, Ludendorff, by then a little crazy but producing flashes of extraordinary imagination, who prophesied a great campaign fought in North Africa as a major phase of a future world war. General Bayerlein gives an excellent account of Alamein from the German point of view.

North-west Europe is allotted two articles, 'France, 1944' by Lieutenant-General Zimmerman and 'The Ardennes' by General Hasso von Manteuffel. The former served as Chief Operations Officer to Commander-in-Chief West; the latter commanded the Fifth Panzer Army in the campaign which he describes. There were so many chops and changes in command in 1944, to say nothing of accidents and suicide, that General Zimmerman makes a witness at the highest level whom it would not have been easy for the editors to replace. He brings out clearly the characteristics and lessons of the campaign. For the German command it resembled one of those nightmares we suffer in youth, when, striving to accomplish some task brooking no delay or to escape from a relentless pursuer, though we start with the belief that our aim is well within our power, we find our feet clogged in mud which becomes ever deeper and more tenacious, until at last we can scarcely move. This immobilizing factor was of course Anglo-American air supremacy.

General von Manteuffel is perhaps the best known to us of these writers and recently paid us a long visit in the role of member of the parliamentary defence committee of the Federal Republic. This account is of absorbing interest as regards both the planning and problems of the Ardennes offensive and the operations. General von Manteuffel disliked the Hitlerian decision to create



in the Sixth Panzer Army, which operated beside his own, a wholly S.S. formation. I do not think this can be attributed to professional jealousy on his part as a regular soldier. The S.S. armoured forces were certainly determined and hard-hitting, but they lacked the skilled staff essential in this type of country. Their commander, Sepp Dietrich, appears to have been rather a slogger than a tactician.

I had not previously seen so clear an abridgement of the plan of the 'Small Solution,' the modification of Hitler's plan for the offensive. This originated with Field-Marshal Model, commanding Army Group B. It was a brilliant alternative and possibly within the scope of the resources available. Hitler's decision against it was due to his feeling that only complete victory was at this stage a goal worth aiming at and that there was no point in letting the risks of his large solution deter him from attempting to secure this. All or nothing.

A last word must be devoted to the subject of self-justification. It is not absent from these pages, but on the whole it is kept within reasonable bounds. Some measure of self-justification becomes virtually unavoidable when a group drawn from the principal participants in an undertaking which proved unsuccessful record their actions and impressions. Even victors yield to the temptation, and they have less excuse. The wise final words of General Westphal should suffice to cover any sins of that kind which are to be found here. 'The fatal decisions described in this book by men who know of what they write were not truly fatal: that is to say, they did not turn assured German victory into certain defeat. In view of the power relationships, the results of these operations were more or less predetermined.'

*Cyril Falls.*

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# THE YEAR OF DESTINY

## 1939-1940

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

*Chief-of-Staff to Commander-in-Chief West*  
1944-1945

WE all remember vividly the initial flash which resulted in the greater explosion now known as the Second World War. The fuse was Polish-German tension concerning the Corridor question (East Prussia had been cut off from the rest of Germany by the terms of the Versailles Treaty) and German demands that the Free City of Danzig be reincorporated in the Reich. It began to splutter in April of 1939, when the German Government denounced the treaty of non-aggression signed with Poland five years before, and as the summer went on it burned ever closer to the explosive charge. It was obvious that Hitler was not interested in any compromise solution. It is also now known that Polish intransigence contributed to the fact that relations became critical during the second half of August.

During the period between the occupation of the Sudetenland and the spring of 1939, only one German military operation was planned in the event of war breaking out. It was based on the assumption that the French would launch an offensive, and it envisaged strictly defensive measures on the Western and on the Polish frontiers alike: the mass of the Field Army was to be ready to move, but was to remain for the time being in its mobilization areas. However, early in 1939, Hitler ordered the three armed services to prepare with all speed a plan for offensive operations against Poland, in view of the possibility that the German-Polish dispute would not prove soluble by peaceful means. This plan was named Operation *White*—the earlier defensive one had borne the code name of Operation *Red*—and involved the employment of the mass of our ground and air forces against Poland, while the minimum number of troops held the Western frontiers. For Hitler calculated that France and Britain, despite their solemn pledges to Poland, would not in fact intervene in the war. He was fortified in this wishful thinking by his success in negotiating a non-aggression pact with Stalin on August 23rd, which was to be followed by a fourth partition of Poland.

Military preparations for the invasion of Poland were begun in the



spring of 1939. A number of regular divisions were moved to the Eastern frontier zone, where they were put to digging trenches and building field defences. The date originally set for the attack was August 25th. On the previous evening, however, Hitler wavered at the very last moment. Only with great difficulty could the columns be halted in their advance towards the frontier. There was a general feeling of relief, which permeated the German military leadership, too, since it seemed that we had once again narrowly avoided war. Unfortunately this sense of relief was premature: and hopes that peace might yet be preserved were vain. On August 31st the orders to advance were issued once again, and on this occasion they were not countermanded. On September 1st, at 05.45 hours, forty-four regular German divisions, including all our mechanized and motorized formations, crossed the German-Polish frontier with the intention of destroying the armed forces of the Polish State.

The German nation accepted the outbreak of war in a mood of solemn gravity. There was now no trace of that jubilant enthusiasm which had been so marked in 1914. In silence the men of military age obeyed their mobilization orders and reported to their depots. It was as though the whole country, men and women, soldiers and civilians, were aware of the fatal nature of what was now beginning.

Hitler and Goering, too, apparently felt that they had crossed the Rubicon, that the first fatal decision had been taken. Addressing the Reichstag on September 1st, Hitler swore that he would return home as a victor, or not at all. And when, on September 3rd, Goering learned that Britain and France had declared war, he said: 'God help us if we should lose this war!'

However, the Polish campaign began with one success after the other. The Polish Army fought bravely, but neither in arms, training, nor leadership was it a match for the Germans, so that within three weeks it was driven from the field. Such parts of it as did not pass into German captivity, were taken prisoner by the Soviet occupation troops which marched up to the demarcation line that Ribbentrop and the Russians had drawn in Moscow. Once again the Polish State had ceased to exist as an independent entity, and the country was divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. The German-controlled western sector was officially designated the 'Général Gouvernement.' A German governor established his seat in the Wavel, the Castle of Cracow which the Poles regarded as a national shrine.

As soon as Poland had been conquered the transfer of the German divisions westwards began. Despite the propaganda put out at the time,



the West Wall, or Siegfried line as it was known abroad, was still unfinished and very far from being 'unassailable': during the Polish campaign it had been manned by a mere thirty-five German divisions, the great majority of which were ill-trained reserve or home-defence units. The French Field Army consisted of sixty-five active and forty-five reserve divisions. If this Army had launched a major offensive on a broad front against the German security forces manning the frontier (for they could hardly be described in more flattering terms) there is little doubt that they could have broken through, particularly during the first ten days of September. Such an attack, launched before any considerable elements of the German Army could be brought across from Poland, would almost certainly have carried the French to the Rhine with little trouble, and might well have seen them across that river. The subsequent course of the war would then have been very different.

However, to the astonishment of many German officers, the French, who must have been well aware of our temporary weakness, did nothing. Only in the Saarbrücken sector and in the Perl area, south of Treves, where the frontiers of Germany, France, and Luxembourg meet, did outpost engagements take place. Along the rest of the front, and particularly along the upper Rhine, it was the period of the *drôle de guerre*. For weeks on end neither side fired a shot, and civilian workers were able to go on building fortifications immediately behind the frontier both by day and by night. This state of affairs continued even when almost all the divisions of the German Field Army had been assembled in the West. Once again Hitler had been proved right in his assertion that the French would throw away their golden opportunity; failing to exploit Germany's delicate position by means of an immediate attack, they lost their chance of inflicting a severe defeat on Hitler's Germany. The next stage would be the overthrow of France at the earliest suitable moment. The whole German order of battle was changed accordingly. Instead of three, there were now eight armies drawn up in the West. The inferior home-defence units had been replaced by active divisions which had completed their training on the battlefields of Poland.

Since late August the shadow of the war had lain darkly across all the provinces of Germany, which had been collectively declared to be the 'Home War Area.' All houses and means of transportation were blacked out. An occasional bomb was dropped during the winter of 1939-40. Food was completely rationed, as were all raw materials, and could only be obtained by the production of ration cards or



some other form of authorization. Mobilization continued. These call-ups permitted further expansion of the German Army in the West until by the spring of 1940 it totalled one hundred and thirty-six divisions.

Hitler wished to attack as early as November 12th, 1939. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army disapproved of this plan, because of the weather conditions and the still inadequate offensive capabilities of the Army. After an agitated scene, Brauchitsch persuaded Hitler to withdraw the order to attack. The original plan, a more powerful version of the one employed in 1914, had placed the point of main effort with the right wing of the German armies, which were to advance through Holland and Belgium. This was scrapped in February of 1940, in favour of the so-called Manstein Plan, which put the point of main effort in the centre.

During the winter more than a dozen dates were fixed for the attack, all of which were cancelled at the very last moment owing to the exceptionally cold weather. Finally, on May 10th, at 05.45 hours, the Western armies, which had meanwhile been trained up to a very high standard, attacked along the entire front between Emden and Karlsruhe. The plan followed was Manstein's.

Operations developed far more swiftly and successfully than had been expected. As early as May 14th the Dutch Army was forced to lay down its arms. Just two weeks later the Belgian armed forces surrendered and were compelled to follow their king, Leopold II, into captivity. The defection of the Belgian divisions drove the British Expeditionary Force back to the coast, where it was in an untenable position from which it was only saved by a decision of Hitler's. He stopped the German armies advancing from the north and south to complete the encirclement of the B.E.F. and, on Goering's suggestion, limited further operations here to bombing by the Luftwaffe. The Luftwaffe, however, was quite incapable of preventing the evacuation of the British, all the more so since the weather deteriorated. By June 4th the greater part of the British divisions, which had fought so valiantly, had been transported back to England, together with rather weaker French and Belgian forces.

The German propaganda organs went to great lengths at the time to denigrate Dunkirk and to present it as a British defeat. Certainly the British had lost all their equipment, but they had saved the troops which were to provide the cadres for the armies which later defeated the Germans in Africa, in Italy, and in the West.

Meanwhile the campaign went on. The Seine was crossed on June 5th.



## COMMENTARY

On June 14th Paris was declared an open city and occupied by the German Army. German vanguards were approaching the Loire. On June 17th the French premier, Marshal Pétain, was compelled to seek armistice terms. These were not granted until the German Army had reached the Atlantic at Bordeaux. Since June 10th the Italians had been in the war. Finally the armistice was signed in the Forest of Compiègne, at the exact spot where that of 1918 had also been signed.

The campaign had lasted for forty-four days, during which the German armies had defeated the armies of France, Belgium, and Holland and had occupied most of metropolitan France. Only one of our enemies had not been knocked out of the war: England. This error, to which I have already referred, was to cost us dear.

Shortly before the campaign in the West, another very bold operation was successfully carried out, the occupation of Denmark and Norway. Germany had long derived most of the iron ore which its industries needed from Sweden, by way of Norway. It was as vitally important for Germany's war effort to ensure that this route remained open, as it was for Great Britain to attempt to close it. We now know that the corresponding decision was taken almost simultaneously on both sides, which in either case would have led to a breach of Scandinavian neutrality. Preparations were being made during the winter of 1939-40, that is to say, during the period of the attack by the Soviet Union on Finland, which fought so courageously and well.

But Hitler was quicker than his opponents and on April 9th his troops landed in all the important Norwegian ports from Oslo to Narvik. It was not until five days later that British and French forces were put ashore in Namsos and Andalsnes. Denmark refrained from offering a senseless resistance and was occupied without any blood being shed. The Norwegians, on the other hand, fought hard, under the leadership of their aged monarch. The German Navy suffered heavy losses, particularly in cruisers and destroyers, and by the month of May the situation at Narvik had become so critical that Hitler was considering the abandonment of operations in Northern Norway. But the German mountain troops committed there hung on bravely, until at last on June 8th Norway ceased to fight and the Allies withdrew their amphibious forces.

Now the whole of the Atlantic coast, from Narvik to the Franco-Spanish frontier, was in German hands. Hitler's empire stretched from Brest in the west to the outskirts of Brest-Litovsk in the east. This was the peak of his power. All his previous enemies, with the

sole exception of Great Britain, had been defeated and driven from the field.

The struggle was now begun to eliminate that 'sea-girt rock' as well. The overture to this was to be the Battle of Britain, the great air battle which forms the subject of the next chapter. The Luftwaffe was now to do what the U-boats, despite their considerable successes, had proved incapable of accomplishing owing to numerical inferiority. Questions concerning the intention to invade the British Isles and the reasons that led to the abandonment of this plan will be discussed in the pages which follow.

PART ONE

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# The Battle of Britain

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*General of the Air Force*  
WERNER KREIPE



WERNER KREIPE served in the bomber unit KG 2 from December 1939 until June 1940, when he was appointed Chief Operations Officer, Third Air Fleet. Later he held other staff appointments on the Western Front and in Russia, received a series of rapid promotions and was appointed Chief of the German Air Staff in 1944. He is now 51 years of age.





GENERAL OF THE AIR FORCE WERNER KREIPE

THE date that I should ascribe to the opening of the Battle of Britain—or perhaps to the overture which preceded the battle—is May 28th, 1940.

The IIIrd Wing (*Gruppe*) of Bomber Group (*Kampfgeschwader*) 2 had been engaged on flying sorties over the disorganized, fleeing remnants of the French Army. On May 27th the Dornier 17s of this wing had again ranged far and wide over central and southern France, meeting no opposition from the French Air Force, which had practically ceased to exist. When that evening the wing returned, without loss, to its airfield at Rocroi, near the Franco-Belgian frontier, the wing commander found fresh orders awaiting him. Tomorrow his target would be the British Expeditionary Force, which was beginning to embark at Dunkirk; and his enemy would be the Royal Air Force.

The wing set off next morning with its full complement of twenty-seven aircraft, and was soon flying north at eleven thousand feet, which was just below cloud base. From this height the crews had a veritable bird's-eye view of Dunkirk in flames and of the beaches already crowded with soldiers, horses, vehicles and equipment of every sort. But before the Dorniers could unload their bombs on this ideal target, the wireless sets began to crackle: 'Enemy fighters coming in from astern.' Within a matter of seconds a squadron of Spitfires—the first these German airmen had met—had hurled itself upon the bomber wing. Despite the heavy defensive fire of the German air-gunners, the British fighters attacked again and again, and succeeded in driving the Dorniers away from their target.

Back at Rocroi the waiting staff officers were left in no doubt as to the pugnacity of the British defence, for the planes of the bomber wing were soon signalling: 'Must break off engagement. Must try to land.' The commander, who was leading his formation, was attacked no less than five times by the same Spitfire. When he landed, I myself counted eighty-six bullet holes in the fuselage of his aircraft, which incidentally speaks volumes for the sturdiness of the Dornier 17, one of our standard bombers during the early



stages of the war. This flight to Dunkirk cost the wing one plane missing and two seriously damaged.

As soon as the wing landed it received orders to take off again, this time with target Nieuport. The moment the Dorniers appeared, the tireless British fighters attacked. But on this occasion there was German fighter support, and though the British forced home their attack time and again, the German bombers, flying in tight formation, managed to get through to the target. Our losses were not inconsiderable. Three Dorniers were compelled to make forced landings behind our lines, with casualties among the crews, while five more were so severely damaged that they were unfit for service for some considerable time.

Thus, on this one day, out of twenty-seven planes in one wing, eleven were put out of action. The days of easy victory were over. We had met the Royal Air Force, head on.

On June 22nd, 1940, the armistice with France was signed, and the German Air Force was able to enjoy a few days of rest. Indeed there were rumours current that the war was almost over. One officer from our Group headquarters was detached to make arrangements for the great victory parade that was to take place down the Champs Elysées, and in the Army some of the older age-groups were being demobilized and sent home.

Armed Forces Supreme Headquarters was located near our airfield, and I took advantage of this fact to visit one or two old friends now serving on Hitler's staff, including Colonel-General Keitel, who had once been my commanding officer, and Captain von Below, who had served under me in the old days and was now Hitler's air adjutant. Both these officers were convinced that England was prepared to sue for peace, and that the war was as good as finished.

Nevertheless, despite this wave of optimism in high places, the Air Force was ordered to make good its relatively light casualties in crews and machines and to prepare for the next battles which must be fought over the Channel and in the English skies. Within a few days the German Air Force was ready.

The power of the Air Force was now at a zenith which it was never again to achieve during the long years of the war. In the occupied territories and north-western Germany the following forces stood ready: eleven fighter groups with a total strength of approximately 1,300 single-engined fighters (Messerschmitt 109s): two fighter-bomber or heavy fighter groups with a total strength

of 180 twin-engined machines (Messerschmitt 110s): ten bomber groups with a total strength of approximately 1,350 twin-engined bombers (Heinkel 111s, Junkers 88s and Dornier 17s). The pilots were highly skilled and both they and their crews were well trained in the tactics of aerial warfare. They had learned much from their experiences in Poland and during the French campaign. Their morale was very high, and they were confident of victory, though they were well aware that severe and testing battles lay ahead. Such was the German Air Force which entered the Battle of Britain.

It was organized in two air fleets, Field-Marshal Kesselring's Second Air Fleet and Field-Marshal Sperrle's Third Air Fleet, both of which were directly subordinate to the Air Force High Command, over which the Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force, Reich-Marshal Goering, presided. The Second Air Fleet had its main headquarters at Brussels, with advanced headquarters on Cap Gris Nez opposite Dover: the Third Air Fleet had its main headquarters in Paris, with advanced headquarters at Deauville. When Goering and his staff arrived in the West, the Commander-in-Chief's special command train was parked at Beauvais, near the airfield of that name.

During the lull between the end of the French campaign and the opening of the Battle of Britain, the ground staffs and construction units of the German Air Force had been exceptionally active. In addition to making captured French and Belgian airfields serviceable once again, many new fields were built in the occupied territories.

On July 2nd the Armed Forces Supreme Command issued its first operational instructions to the Air Force for the campaign against the United Kingdom which was intended to culminate in the invasion of the British Isles. There were two basic tasks assigned to the Air Force:

(1) The interdiction of the Channel to merchant shipping, to be carried out in conjunction with German naval forces, by means of attacks on convoys, the destruction of harbour facilities, and the sowing of mines in harbour areas and the approaches thereto.

(2) The destruction of the Royal Air Force.

On July 10th bomber formations, with single-engined and twin-engined fighter escort, began to attack the merchant convoys which the British, with characteristic imperturbability, were still sending



through the Channel to the Port of London, the hub of their entire supply network.

I took part in one of these first anti-convoy sorties with IIIrd Wing of Bomber Group 2. We were stationed at Cambrai. The convoy had been sighted between Dover and Dungeness. Our briefing took only a few minutes, and within half an hour of being airborne we had sighted the coast of Kent.

The Channel was bathed in brilliant sunshine. The sea and the sky were contrasting shades of blue that merged at the horizon. A light haze hung over the English coast and there, far below us, was the convoy, like so many toy ships with wispy wakes fanning out behind. As soon as we were observed, the ships of the convoy dispersed, the merchantmen manœuvring violently and the escorting warships moving out at full speed. Anti-aircraft shells peppered the sky. Our fighters now appeared. We made our first bomb run, and fountains leaped up around the ships. The anti-aircraft batteries stationed on the English coast added their fire to that coming from the ships, though we were in general beyond their range. We turned away towards France and prepared for our second run, for only half our bombs had been released on the first one. By now the fighter squadrons of the Royal Air Force had joined in, and the sky above the English coast was a twisting, turning *mêlée* of fighters as our Messerschmitt 109s, and below them the 110s, fought it out with the Spitfires and Hurricanes. My wing was in the air for three hours in all, before we returned to base. We reported one heavy cruiser and four merchant ships sunk, one merchant ship damaged, and eleven British fighters shot down or damaged. We had lost two bombers, two twin-engined fighters and three single-engined fighters during the course of this engagement.

Operations of this sort continued throughout the course of the next few weeks.

Meanwhile the Army was filled with rumours that the great assault would be launched in the very near future. Indeed the feverish preparations for the invasion that were being made all along the coast were plain for all to see. The French, Belgian and Dutch ports were crammed with craft of every description. Embarkation and debarkation exercises went on without pause. Staffs worked round the clock.

In the Air Force morale was high and confidence very great.



The Italian General Douhet, who had propounded the theory that the air arm must prove predominant in any modern war, had quickly found many disciples among our officers. Some of us believed that the Air Force, and the Air Force alone, would strike the decisive blow in the Battle of Britain.

Other senior Air Force staff officers were more prudent. They shared the reservations of the Army General Staff, where it was repeatedly pointed out that the Royal Navy was a most powerful force which had so far suffered only relatively light damage and was therefore still very much a fleet in being. Furthermore, as the Army correctly stated, our Air Force lacked the armour-piercing bombs needed to cripple the heavily armoured British warships. In general, it might be said that while at this time we of the Air Force regarded our service as the decisive one, we were not so arrogant as to believe that we could win the war single-handed. Meanwhile in the Army, with its traditional doctrines of continental warfare, the plans for Operation *Sealion* (the code-name for the invasion) came to be regarded with increasing scepticism.

On July 16th Hitler issued his directive for Operation *Sealion* to the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces. It began as follows:

‘As England, in spite of the hopelessness of her military position, has so far shown herself unwilling to come to any compromise, I have decided to begin to prepare for, and if necessary carry out, an invasion of England. The objective is to prevent England being used as a base from which to continue the war against Germany. Preparations for the whole undertaking will be completed by the middle of August . . . .’

Three days later a special session of the Reichstag was called to celebrate the conquest of France. In his speech Hitler again called upon Great Britain to end the war. It was generally accepted in Germany at this time that Hitler really believed in the possibility of a compromise peace with the British. But this offer was coldly rebuffed by the British Government a few days later.

I have already referred to the divergence of opinions within the German services concerning the feasibility of Operation *Sealion*. During the last days of July Hitler sent for the commander of the Third Air Fleet and for his Chief of Staff (General Korten, who was killed in the bomb attack on Hitler four years later); in typical fashion he attempted to silence the doubts instilled in him by his



Army advisers, by vehemently demanding the violent and maximum commitment of the Air Force against Britain.

Early in August air operations in the West entered a new phase. The weight of our attack was shifted from the shipping in the Channel to targets directly related to the forthcoming invasion of Britain. In order to achieve air supremacy over the Channel and the English coast, our squadrons were now ordered to attack the ground installations of the Royal Air Force and the training schools. A secondary objective was the British munitions industry, and particularly the aircraft factories. Channel shipping was now relegated to third place.

The Air Force was informed that it would receive its orders concerning the part it must play in supporting the Army during the actual invasion only when the assault was about to be launched.

Our present task, then, was to prepare for the invasion by destroying the Royal Air Force. We were also to hinder the reorganization and re-equipment of the British ground forces that had been going on since their defeat at Dunkirk. We were to reduce British supplies of fuel and food to a level below the acceptable minimum: it was believed that this would make the populace anxious for peace. For the first time in modern history, the people of England were now to feel the full and direct impact of war on their own soil: their morale was expected to deteriorate in consequence.

Our squadrons took to the air in the confident certainty that only this last enemy lay between us and final victory. But the first few days of fighting showed us quite plainly that though he might be the last, he was certainly the most formidable foe we had yet encountered. We had, in fact, met our equals, airmen who would fight on to the end, regardless. Casualty lists grew longer. At times it seemed as though only one more sustained effort were needed on our part to drive the Royal Air Force from the skies. According to the theoretical calculations of the Air Force General Staff, British Fighter Command should have already ceased to exist. Yet the next day the German pilots once again found the Spitfires and Hurricanes climbing to meet them, a brave enemy who fought in the consciousness that this was for him a battle for survival. Our bomber squadrons, though they suffered heavy losses, succeeded in carrying out their missions, yet the annihilating effect that these raids were supposed to produce failed to appear. Even at this phase



## THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

of the Battle of Britain it was made clear that very great power in the air is needed if initial successes are to be maintained for any length of time.

Colonel Galland, who as a Lieutenant-General was later to be Inspector of Fighters, was one of the two most celebrated fighter aces to make his name during the Battle of Britain. The other was his friend, Captain Moelders. These two great pilots soon realized the nature of the damage that was being inflicted on the German Air Force and recognized the tactical and other weaknesses that were now revealed. By personal example and leadership they did their uttermost to help their comrades-in-arms. Nor were they slow to express their views and, when necessary, utter unambiguous warnings to the very highest authorities.

During the Battle of Britain a high standard of chivalry between adversaries prevailed. An example of this is the well-known story of Squadron-Leader—as he then was—Douglas Bader's artificial legs. Squadron-Leader Bader had lost both his legs before the war, but had overcome this great handicap and was now a fighter ace. He was shot down near St. Omer and his aluminium legs were smashed. That evening he was entertained in the officers' mess of Galland's group. Squadron-Leader Bader there said that he wondered if there were any means whereby the spare pair that he possessed in England could be sent to him. Galland got in touch with me—I was chief operations officer at Third Air Fleet at the time—and I spoke to Field-Marshal Sperrle. With the Field-Marshal's approval we sent a message by wireless, using the international emergency wavelength, and within forty-eight hours the Squadron-Leader's artificial legs came floating down by parachute on to St. Omer airfield.

Meanwhile both the Armed Forces Supreme Command and the High Command of the Air Force remained uncertain and hesitant as to what exactly it was that they were trying to do. Despite the perfectly clear strategic directives that had been given us, Goering in particular continually interfered in the actual conduct of the offensive. His multifarious responsibilities frequently entailed his absence in Berlin for days or even weeks on end, though he left his Air Force staff behind him in France. But distance did not dampen his ardour to intervene, and the most remarkable orders would reach us from the Capital, orders which sometimes affected the carrying out of tactical operations.



The Naval High Command and the High Command of the Army once again began to express their doubts and fears concerning Operation *Sealion*. Hitler had never been fully convinced on the subject of the invasion, and now he too began to waver. On August 10th the invasion date, originally fixed for the end of that month, was postponed to late September. But on September 4th, in a speech, Hitler said: 'If people in England are puzzled, and are asking, "Why doesn't he come?" I can put your minds at rest. He's coming.' And in the same speech he pronounced the fateful words: 'If they [the English] announce that they intend to launch heavy attacks against our cities—then our answer is that we shall rub their cities out.' Meanwhile the German Air Force was constantly struggling to achieve air supremacy, as ordered, and to drive the Royal Air Force from the skies. The pilots and crews felt repeatedly that victory was almost within their grasp. Then came September 15th, the turning-point. On that day, in heavy battles over England, fifty-six of our aeroplanes were shot down.

On September 17th Hitler once again postponed the date of the invasion. The battle went on. But now our squadrons were being badly mauled and were suffering casualties that it would be difficult, if not impossible, ever to make good again. The commanders of both Air Fleets begged Goering, in the strongest terms, to abandon these costly daylight attacks and to switch to night bombing. This meant the learning of new tactics, but at last and bit by bit these were mastered. On October 12th Hitler decided to cancel plans for an invasion that year, though he maintained that this was simply a postponement of Operation *Sealion* until the spring of 1941.

By this decision, the German Supreme Command conceded victory in the first, and as it turned out in the decisive, round to the British.

Thus the British were granted a breathing spell while our bomber squadrons went over to night operations.

During the daylight phase of the Battle of Britain the Royal Air Force, though confronted with a great semicircle of hostile territory owing to our occupation of Holland, Belgium and France, were in fact not unfavourably situated. They were fighting a defensive battle over their own soil. They possessed first-rate ground installations, and their pilots displayed the utmost courage and made the best possible use of their equipment. Being on the de-



fensive, the Royal Air Force could employ its fighter force to the maximum, and this was done, the same pilots taking off again and again on a single day, thus proving that their tenacity matched their valour. But perhaps the most unpleasant surprise for the Germans during this phase of the battle was the appearance of radar, a hitherto unknown new invention which gave the British timely warning of the approach of our bombers and fighters. Radar at least doubled the efficacy of their own fighter force, for it enabled them to discount German feints and to concentrate their strength where it was really needed. The British anti-aircraft gunners also soon became very skilful and inflicted heavy losses on the attacking German formations.

The deterioration of the weather which now set in also undoubtedly helped the courageous defence. And the lateness of the season was a factor which encouraged Hitler in his decision to cancel his invasion plans for 1940. With the end of the great daylight battles, Supreme Headquarters settled down to calculate the profits and losses of the summer's campaign in the air. It made grim reading.

Despite continual replacements, our daily figures for operational aircraft had, between August 1st and October 1st, dropped to five hundred below establishment. According to our calculations the Royal Air Force, during this same period, had lost eleven hundred machines. Nobody on our side could know that the British were very nearly at the end of their resources too. Our own problems, however, became pressing. The replacement of trained crews was at least as much behind schedule as was the replacement of planes. Supreme Command had to adopt a new strategy in accordance with these facts. It was therefore decided to move on to the third phase of the Battle of Britain, which it will be recalled had as objective the destruction of British industry. And it was now decided that this should be done by night bombing, which should reduce our losses to tolerable proportions.

Adolf Hitler had hitherto refused to sanction such bombing, but now he gave his approval to it, on the grounds that during the past summer the Royal Air Force had made similar raids on Wilhelms-haven, Cologne and the cities of the Ruhr. When, late in 1940, Royal Air Force Bomber Command attacked Hamburg and Bremen by night, Hitler ordered that the German bombers concentrate on London.

Thus the original intention—to defeat the Royal Air Force



as a preliminary to a landing in strength on the English coast—was now abandoned. This gave our sorely pressed adversary time to breathe again, time which he was able to employ in the rebuilding of his fighter force which had been on the brink of annihilation.

In addition to these night bombing raids, other units were given the task of mining the river estuaries and the principal British ports. These units were grouped together to form Air Corps IX. But for the next few months bad weather made all intensive operations of this nature very difficult.

During this third phase of the Battle of Britain we had two main sources of intelligence on which to draw in assessing enemy dispositions and therefore in making our plans. The first was that provided by air reconnaissance. The reconnaissance squadrons, which also came under Air Corps IX, were extremely active. I myself occasionally flew on these missions, in a Junkers 88 modified for this task. Our other principal source of intelligence was that provided by wireless intercepts. This not only provided a valuable check on information obtained by direct reconnaissance, but also enabled us to assess the distribution of British strength within the United Kingdom.

The commanders and staffs of the Second and Third Air Fleets co-operated in preparing a monthly plan of attack against those objectives which were designated by the Air Force High Command as being particularly vital. At this time I was head of the Plans Section of Third Air Fleet. The basic monthly plan was broken down into detailed orders for each day's or night's raids on the various industrial centres, the London docks and the other major British ports. Such orders were drawn up in the closest collaboration with the neighbouring Air Fleet.

But at the highest levels there continued to be constant vacillations in matters of strategy, and nowhere was this more apparent than at Air Force High Command. Goering and his staff had by now retired to Berlin, but he continued to intervene in our operations. Quite frequently, and often at the very last moment, he would order the cancellation of a well-prepared operation, and on the basis of unconfirmed intelligence received that very day—or perhaps for political reasons which seemed of importance to the Supreme Command—would order an altogether different operation to be undertaken at once.



The men who controlled the German Air Force were, in fact, totally lacking in firm objectives or in sound strategic concepts. This was a deficiency, incidentally, which was not limited to the period of the Battle of Britain. Goering swore by the doctrines of General Douhet, so far as he was capable of understanding them. Yet he hurled the most bitter reproaches at his fliers when plans went awry, as for instance on the occasion of the two Liverpool raids when the bombs were dropped on dummy installations erected by the British.

Throughout the winter the war in the air mounted in intensity and violence. The German bombers pressed home their attacks against Coventry, Liverpool, Hull, Portsmouth, Manchester and many other cities, which became flaming tokens of the bomber crews' will to victory. Night after night the mine-laying aeroplanes silently and selflessly sowed their terrible cargoes of destruction in the approaches to the great ports and in the Thames estuary. The southern ports were gradually made unusable to enemy shipping. From Hull in the north, along the east and south coasts and the west coast as far as Bristol, severe losses were inflicted on the British merchant marine.

But there were too many targets. Simultaneous operations against the ports, the industrial cities and London resulted in a dispersal of effort—a lack of concentration against any one of these objectives—and led to excessively heavy bomber losses. Casualties, during these winter months, were out of proportion to the results achieved. Though our bomber crews were well trained, and certainly did not hang back when sent into action, the German Air Force was technically not constructed to wage war at extreme range and across water. We lacked above all a heavily armed four-engined bomber with a radius of action of 1,200 miles and capable of operating at an altitude of 30,000 feet or more.

In February of 1941 Reich-Marshal Goering arrived in Paris with a large entourage for the purpose of discussing, with Field-Marshal Kesselring and Sperrle, the future conduct of the air war against England.

With an ostentation only rivalled by the intensity of the security precautions, a conference was held at the Quai d'Orsay in the historic Salle de l'Horloge. Goering was, as always, dissatisfied with what he regarded as the inadequate successes of the German



Air Force, and he berated the commanders and the crews of both air fleets in most violent terms. The two field-m Marshals attempted, with all due respect, to rebut these charges, and they tried to convince the Commander-in-Chief of the toughness of the fighting and the very difficult nature of the tasks assigned to their air fleets. Goering refused to listen. Even visits to the front line units, including a conversation with Galland whose great experience was now recognized by all, failed to produce any effect. The taking of new decisions based on prevailing conditions was a matter of urgency, but this was not done, and the bomber offensive simply continued along the same lines as before.

The output of the training schools had now been stepped up, so that there was an adequate flow of crews to replace those shot down. However, owing to their lack of combat experience, it was precisely these fresh crews who fell victim most readily to the ever-increasing skill of the British night fighters—frequently on their very first sortie, and that despite further training which we gave them with advanced training units at the very front itself.

In February 1941 the Third Air Fleet was assigned a new task, namely the making of detailed plans for Operation *Felix*. This operation, to be undertaken only with the prior approval of the Spanish Government, involved the movement across Spain of certain Army and Air Force units and the capture of Gibraltar.

As is known, Operation *Felix* never went beyond the stage of staff planning, primarily owing to the failure of Hitler's meeting with the Spanish Head of State at Montoire, on the Franco-Spanish frontier, in October of 1940. This meeting had produced no positive results, and the ensuing staff talks between German and Spanish officers were equally barren, as a result of General Franco's cautious and canny refusal to commit himself and his country.

The plans for Operation *Felix* were therefore so much waste paper. Meanwhile the senior air staffs in the West, in collaboration with Army Group A under Field-Marshal von Rundstedt and Army Group D under Field-Marshal von Witzleben, continued to elaborate the plans for an eventual invasion of England in 1941. We had not been informed of the drastic changes of intention at Supreme Headquarters.

It was only in March of that year that a few senior staff officers were informed of the possibility of a clash between Germany and



Russia, which would mean the final abandonment of the Battle of Britain.

Despite these impending developments, Goering again visited France during the month of March. Accompanied by Field-Marshal Sperrle, he inspected the newest model of the Junkers 88. Goering quite failed to appreciate the true capabilities of this aeroplane, and ordered that a force of the new Junkers 88s be sent against Aberdeen. Field-Marshal Sperrle pointed out that this was tantamount to ordering the crews to commit suicide. A bitter argument followed. Field-Marshal Sperrle grew extremely angry, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him not to tender his resignation.

The great air battle went on, with mounting losses to our bomber force, though we had some successes too. During this period sixty-five major raids took place on London. By sending the same planes out twice in the course of the long winter night, it was occasionally possible to strike at London with as many as eight hundred bombers in a single raid, an astonishing performance at that period of the war.

Our co-operation with the Navy, and particularly with the U-boats, grew steadily closer. One result of this was the creation, in March of 1941, of a new command post, that of *Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik*, or 'Air Commander Atlantic,' with headquarters at Bordeaux. This officer was responsible for aerial reconnaissance carried out over the Atlantic on behalf of the U-boat arm, and he also commanded the heavy bomber squadrons which collaborated with the submarines in our war against British shipping. These squadrons frequently circled the British Isles, returning on a course that took them around the northernmost point of Scotland and landing in Norway, whence they would set off on their next mission.

In late May of 1941 it was the bombers of *Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik*, now carrying aerial torpedoes, that attempted to come to the rescue of the *Bismarck*, when that great ship, after her victory over the *Hood* and the *Prince of Wales*, found herself encircled by an overwhelming naval force four hundred sea miles west of Brest. When the *Bismarck* went down, with her flag still flying, the surface war against the Royal Navy was really over. Henceforth we had only our U-boats and our air striking force on which to rely.

It became increasingly evident to the senior commanders that the



Battle of Britain must be definitely called off during the summer of 1941. As the long list of Air Corps and other units due for transfer to the new Eastern Front reached the various headquarters in France, it grew clear that we would certainly not have enough strength left in the West to continue the battle, and indeed—despite strenuous protests—it seemed unlikely that our fighter strength would be adequate even to safeguard the Dutch-Belgian-French coast.

Field-Marshal Kesselring and the staff of the Second Air Fleet departed for new duties in the East. The Third Air Fleet was now responsible for the entire Western theatre of operations in the air.

During the month of May the great movement took place, and the units that now went to the East frequently expressed their heartfelt relief to be leaving our theatre. What remained behind was far too weak a force for the tasks assigned to it, the ground organizations being particularly inadequate. We were able to screen the transfer of the main body of the German Air Force from the enemy's intelligence, by misleading their wireless intercept service—we kept our signals output at the same high level as before—and by engaging in intensive activity with such forces as still remained to us. It thus proved possible to keep the enemy in the dark for a matter of weeks.

In this way, without fanfare or true climax, did the Battle of Britain come to an end.

The well-known British writer on military matters, Major-General J. F. C. Fuller, has described the Battle of Britain as being strategically one of the most fateful campaigns ever fought. He points out that, with all respect for the skill of the German soldiers, Hitler and his advisers were imprisoned in their continental concept of war. He thinks to see proof that the German High Command believed in the possibility of defeating Great Britain through air power alone.

In my opinion General Fuller is in error on this last point. The responsible German air staffs, at least, never believed that Great Britain could be conquered by our Air Force alone. What we did believe was that a strong air force could strike the decisive blow against the United Kingdom, provided that the Army and the Navy were fully committed in an invasion. But, by the autumn of 1940, this possibility no longer existed. At that period the German Air Force was probably strong enough and capable

enough, in relation to the strength of the Royal Air Force and the output of the British aircraft factories, to carry out the part assigned it in Operation *Sealion*. The Army and the Navy, however, were not ready to play their part, and the Supreme Command had evidently become most half-hearted about the whole undertaking. Loud and repeated protestations along these lines by Reich-Marshal Goering only served to conceal his own innermost doubts, for if the truth be told he never had much faith in Operation *Sealion* himself. He was entranced by the ideas of General Douhet. I myself doubt whether he ever grasped the full implications of the Italian's doctrine.

I agree with General Fuller's conclusions concerning Egypt and the Suez Canal, which, as he points out, would have provided the ideal target for Germany's armed forces at that time. As he says, if the whole weight of the German war machine had then been thrown into the Middle East, instead of frittering away the Air Force in the skies over England, a deadly blow might well have been struck against the whole of the British Empire.

So much is clear: though the air battles over England were perhaps a triumph of skill and bravery so far as the German air crews were concerned, from the strategic point of view it was a failure and contributed to our ultimate defeat. The decision to fight it marks a turning point in the history of the Second World War. The German Air Force, lacking any clear objective laid down by the Supreme Command, was bled almost to death, and suffered losses which could never again be made good throughout the course of the war.

In conclusion, it is my belief that the experiences of aerial warfare now gained strengthened the British, and later the American, leaders in their determination to make the air arm into their most powerful, and therefore into their final and most decisive, weapon of war.



# THE WAR SPREADS

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

THE failure of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain had proved that it was not possible to force a brave country to its knees solely by means of aerial bombardment. This was particularly clear in the case of London, and was to be confirmed in the years to come by the steadfastness of the German population, which stood up to the very heaviest bombing. Nor had the Luftwaffe succeeded in neutralizing Britain's fighter defences. This meant that one of the decisive conditions for an invasion of Great Britain did not exist, since with both the British sea and air defences intact a German invading force was bound to suffer very heavy losses indeed. As the weather would not permit landings later than the first half of October, Hitler now decided that Operation *Sealion* would not be undertaken in 1940.

In truth from the very beginning Hitler had been fundamentally reluctant to carry out such an operation. His strategic concepts were basically limited within the framework of orthodox, continental practice, and he felt a marked repugnance for amphibious warfare. This was to be revealed again later, in the Mediterranean, when the question of an attack on Malta in 1942 was under discussion. In his reluctance to launch *Sealion* he was supported by the undoubtedly correct, factual appreciation of the Navy, which did not believe that it could protect the invading armada against the Home Fleet, in view of the weakness of the forces at its disposal.

The Army High Command, on the other hand, was optimistic. It regarded the cross-Channel operation simply as a river-crossing on a very large scale, and it did not believe that enemy resistance on British soil would be either very strong or of long duration, owing to the massive quantities of equipment left behind and lost at Dunkirk. Despite the superiority of the British Fleet and the very limited means of transportation available to us (which consisted principally of river craft), the Army hoped that it would be able within a comparatively short time to create bridgeheads deep enough to permit the transfer across the Channel of reinforcements on a large scale. Whether a successful invasion would have knocked England out of the war seemed, even at the time, doubtful, since the British are a tough and stubborn nation. We had to reckon with the departure of the Government, the



fleet and part of the other armed forces to Canada, whence they would have continued the war.

But another consideration altogether was the deciding factor in Hitler's plans. Shortly before the end of the Western campaign he had confided to his closest military entourage that it might be necessary to crush the Red Peril in the East at once. He was strengthened in this point of view by various events, namely, the Russian attack on Finland in the previous year, followed in the summer of 1940 by the seizure of the Baltic States and of the Rumanian province of Bessarabia. It was specifically the Russian threat to Rumania, which imperilled Germany's oil supplies from that country, that worried Hitler most. His immediate reply was to send a military mission to Rumania, where Antonescu's authoritarian régime now ruled the kingdom. This in turn increased Russia's mistrust. When a conference attended by Molotov in November of 1940 failed to reach agreement concerning the delineation of Germany's and Russia's respective spheres of influence, Hitler decided to act. The next month he issued his celebrated *Directive No. 21*, which laid down that the *Wehrmacht* must prepare for a 'swift campaign' to crush Soviet Russia. Rumania and Finland could be reckoned as allies. Thus were the dice cast once again.

As a result of this decision the German divisions massed in the West began to move, one by one, to the area behind the eastern frontiers, which had hitherto been almost denuded of troops. This made it obvious that the danger of invasion was receding for the British. The Armed Forces Supreme Command issued instructions to the effect that continued invasion preparations were to be simulated, but such measures could, of course, not deceive the enemy for long, despite the continuation of heavy raids on the cities of England throughout the winter of 1940-41.

In the south, too, activity was increasing. In the Mediterranean the summer months had been comparatively uneventful, but now that theatre was beginning to attract attention. Despite Mussolini's bombastic utterances, he did not launch an immediate attack on the dangerous island fortress of Malta, thus with one stroke cutting Britain's main line of communications with the Far East and safeguarding his own with Italy's North and East African territories. However, in September Marshal Graziani did cross the Egyptian frontier with eight divisions. He advanced as far as Sidi Barrani, where he stopped. This hesitancy on his part was fully justified, as events were soon to prove. For in December General Wavell counter-attacked the ill-equipped Italian forces, which quickly found themselves on the



very brink of disaster. Advancing with great speed and momentum, the British took Bardia, the strong fortress of Tobruk, Benghazi, and by the end of January 1941 were only a few hundred miles from Tripoli. Finally, in this hour of extreme peril when 140,000 Italians had already been taken prisoner and all Libya seemed on the point of being lost, Mussolini accepted the offer of German armed support which had been made during the previous year, and which he had then refused. In February General Rommel, whose brilliant leadership on the battlefield and whose blameless character were to win him world-wide renown, landed in North Africa. In the course of a most spectacular counter-attack he had driven the British back to the Egyptian frontier by the end of March. We shall hear more of him in later chapters.

In the late autumn the Italians became active in another theatre. In the hopes of obtaining a quick victory, Italian troops crossed the Greek-Albanian border on October 27th, 1940. They had grossly underestimated the powers of resistance of the Greek Army and soon found themselves in very serious trouble. At one time they were even in danger of being thrown into the sea. Germany had previously warned the Italians against embarking on this adventure with insufficient forces, but now the development of the Greek-Italian war necessitated German intervention and in mid-December seven German divisions were moved to southern Rumania. The Italians were rescued from their wretched plight by the spring campaign against Yugoslavia, which had 'deserted' the Axis, and against the British troops which had landed in Greece.

This operation, which was followed by the celebrated assault on Crete by parachute and other airborne troops, succeeded, it is true, in the speedy destruction of the Yugoslav and Greek armies and in the expulsion of the British from the south-eastern corner of the European continent. But it did not lead to the pacification of the Balkans. Until the very end of the war the Balkans remained an open sore, and tied up large quantities of troops.

This was not the last of Italy's misfortunes. In May the Duke of Aosta, commanding in Ethiopia, was compelled to surrender to the British. At the same time the anti-British uprising in Iraq collapsed and Syria, a mandated French territory which had been under Italian control since the signing of the armistice at Compiègne, went over to the Allies. This marked the elimination of all German influence from the Middle East.

The troops needed for the conquest of the Balkans had of necessity been drawn from our eastern armies. This led to a most unwelcome postponement of the date fixed for the invasion of Russia, which cost



us a good six weeks of the limited campaigning season provided by the brief East European summer. Stalin was, of course, aware of the massing of German divisions beyond his western frontier; he suspected what was afoot and strengthened his own forces accordingly. Apart from that he apparently preserved, to the very last moment, a hope that it would not come to war. Thus the German attack, which was launched at 03.30 hours on June 22nd, 1941, found him strategically prepared but took him tactically by surprise.

From Rumania to the Baltic three army groups attacked, with one hundred and forty-five German divisions assisted, now or later, by Rumanian, Hungarian, Slovak, Croat, Italian, French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, and Scandinavian contingents. In the far north Finland, too, declared war upon the Soviet Union. It almost seemed as though all Europe were marching to defeat the Red colossus. In fact, though, these foreign elements were only small bodies of troops, some no larger than a battalion, few exceeding a division in strength.

Hitler had reckoned on the rapid collapse of the Red Army. So certain was he of victory that he ordered the production of munitions to be cut down. His appreciation of the situation was soon proved utterly wrong, and that of the Army High Command correct. It is true that during the early stages of the campaign tens of thousands of Russian soldiers deserted, that in the great encirclement battles of Bialystok, of Minsk, of Kiev, and of Vyasma millions of prisoners were taken, that the German radio could and did announce one stupendous victory after the other. Yet the mass of the Russian Army, inspired by its commissars, fought on bitterly and to the death. One very unpleasant surprise was the appearance of superior Russian weapons, such as the T34 tank with which the German anti-tank guns were unable to cope. Furthermore, it soon became apparent that the Germans had not entered Russia as liberators. They brought with them a régime at least as oppressive as that which had gone before. Though the troops in the occupied territory behaved, in general, correctly, the disgusting activities of the *Sicherheitsdienst's* 'Commandos' in the rear areas were soon to become common knowledge. The fully justified loathing which such deeds inspired in the cruelly disappointed Russian population served to knit the nation together and to harden its determination to resist. Thus the invader helped the Soviet Government to overcome the crisis. The Russians were also granted a breathing-space, which contributed to their stabilization of the situation, when the Army High Command failed to persuade Hitler that the capture of Moscow must take precedence over the capture of the Ukraine. Once again precious



weeks of campaigning weather were wasted, on this occasion in argument.

The next chapter describes the crisis which arose as a result of the early onset of wintry weather. This crisis found the German vanguards at the gates of the Russian capital, where the German Army, hitherto regarded as invincible, was within an ace of annihilation. But before discussing the Battle of Moscow a few words about the other services would be apposite here.

The Luftwaffe, which had only come into existence in the years immediately preceding the war, already had great achievements behind it, in Poland, in the West, in the Balkans, in the Mediterranean theatre, and now in the huge expanses of Russia. Without the Luftwaffe the *Blitz* campaigns would have been impossible. But heavy casualties, particularly in the Battle of Britain, had left their mark and it seemed that the Luftwaffe would soon have reached and passed its peak.

The Navy, very weak both in surface and in underwater craft, was, like the Luftwaffe, a new service. The Navy not only committed all its U-boats but also, in contrast to the old Imperial Navy of the First World War, all its surface ships, heavy and light cruisers, quite ruthlessly. It was thus able to render the high seas very insecure and by the end of 1940 had sunk more than two million tons of enemy merchant shipping. But in the process it had itself suffered heavily both in large and medium warships, as well as in destroyers: the U-boats showed the greatest losses of all.

PART TWO

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# Moscow

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*General*

GÜNTHER BLUMENTRITT



GÜNTHER BLUMENTRITT was appointed Chief of Staff Fourth Army in the autumn of 1940 and held this appointment until posted as Chief of the Operations Department of the German Army High Command in January 1942. At the end of that year he was made Chief of Staff of Army Group D with the rank of Lieutenant-General. He held this appointment until September 1944 when he was given command of the 12th SS Corps in the rank of General of the Waffen SS. He was appointed commander of 25th Army in January 1945, and assumed command of 1st Parachute Army in March 1945. He holds the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. He is now 63 years of age.





GENERAL GÜNTHER BLUMENTRITT

## Introduction

THE Battle of Moscow was the first major German defeat on land during the Second World War. It marked the end of the *Blitzkrieg* technique which had won Hitler and his *Wehrmacht* such spectacular victories in Poland, France and the Balkans. It was in Russia that the first fatal decisions were taken. From the political point of view, perhaps the most fatal of all had been the decision to attack that country in the first place. For now we were fighting a very much stronger enemy than any we had met before. There were no more easy victories to be gained in the endless East.

Many of our leaders had grossly underestimated the new enemy. This was partly due to ignorance, for some of them knew neither the Russian people nor their soldiers. Several of our responsible senior officers had never campaigned in the East, having spent the whole of the First World War on the Western Front, and had no idea of the difficulties presented by the terrain nor of the toughness of the Russian fighting man. They chose to ignore the warnings of the experts.

Napoleon once remarked that soldiering is solely a question of psychology. That is not of course quite true; the Emperor liked to exaggerate. But it is correct to say that at least the half of generalship is the ability to cope with the unexpected and incalculable, the other half being common sense and detailed staff work. Many otherwise incomprehensible incidents in history only make sense if one examines the personalities involved.

My chief sources for the chapter that follows have been my personal notes and memories; until January 1942 I was Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal von Kluge who commanded the Fourth Army on the central sector of the front. I have also had access to the war diary kept by Major von Wienskowski at Fourth Army during this period, the very raw material of history. But before discussing the actual Battle of Moscow it would, I feel, be as well to glance at the background and at the campaign which culminated in that defeat.



## *Hitler and the East*

In January of 1940 Hitler's personal adjutant, General Schmundt, told me of conversations which he had recently had with the Führer on the subject of Russia. I noted down at the time what Schmundt then told me. Hitler's attitude towards Russia, during this first winter of the war, when that country was still a friendly neutral, can be summarized as follows.

For a generation the Bolsheviks had had control of Russia, time enough to convert the Russian people and particularly the youth of Russia to their creed. The destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 meant that Russia's historic enemy and Europe's traditional bulwark against the East had ceased to exist. Nor did Weimar Germany with its 100,000-man army constitute any sort of a threat to the Soviet Union. Yet throughout the 'twenties and 'thirties the Soviets created an enormous army, containing over a million men in peacetime, which they steadily strengthened. This antedated German rearmament in 1935 and therefore could not be regarded as a response to Hitler's reintroduction of conscription. What was the purpose of this huge military machine? Hitler could draw only one conclusion: that it was Stalin's intention to conquer all Europe. Since the *Wehrmacht* was now the only effective barrier between the Red Army and Europe, he considered that it would be Germany's mission to break the peril in the East and push back the encroaching forces of Bolshevism. He was keeping a close watch on developments in that quarter and was prepared to act if and when it became necessary to do so.

This, as I say, was his attitude during the winter of 1939-40. It must be realized that Hitler was not a realistic statesman. He never regarded politics as the sober pursuit of a definite end. For him politics was a dream, and he the dreamer, ignoring alike time, space and the fact that German power was limited and Germany herself only a small patch on a large globe. Shortly after the Polish campaign, we may assume, his dream became preoccupied with the East. Perhaps he even visualized a modern 'Germanization' of the vast eastern territories as had happened in previous centuries. What did not figure in this dream were the endless plains, the poor or non-existent roads, the huge swamps and forests, the miserable, scattered villages and, above all, the tough and sturdy Russian soldier. He himself, as a private in the First World War, had served only in the West. He had no knowledge of conditions in the East.



After his spectacular victories in Poland, Norway, France and the Balkans, Hitler became convinced that he could crush the Red Army as easily as he had defeated his other enemies. He was impervious to all warning voices, and there were plenty of them raised. In the spring of 1941 Field-Marshal von Rundstedt, who had spent most of the First World War on the Eastern Front, asked him if he knew what it meant to invade Russia. The Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch, and his Chief of the General Staff, General Halder, also warned Hitler against this operation. So too did General Köstring, who had lived in Russia for years and knew the country and also Stalin intimately. It was all to no avail. Hitler simply refused to believe them.

It seems that Hitler first seriously contemplated an attack on Russia during the summer of 1940. His motives were dual: first, to get in his blow before the Russians could attack him; secondly, to win living-space for the surplus population of Germany. At this time only the very top political and military leaders were apprised of this. The plan was, to a certain extent, dependent on his securing peace with Britain, which he still hoped to be able to do. He knew that he could only carry out his intentions in the East successfully if his Western front was secure. A two-front war spelt, as always, eventual disaster for Germany. But when this essential condition failed to be realized, when it became quite clear that Britain would never make peace with Hitler's Germany, Hitler did not abandon his Eastern adventure. With a firm hand he swung round the helm and steered the German ship of state straight for the rocks of disaster.

The political decision was taken during the autumn of 1940, on the occasion of Molotov's state visit to Berlin. Molotov laid down a number of Russian demands in the Balkans and elsewhere which Hitler brusquely refused. Despite the German-Soviet treaty and the partition of Poland, there was no real contact between the two governments. Their relations were polite but cool, and based on a firm, mutual distrust. However, Russia's relations with the West, and particularly with Britain, were even worse. Indeed Britain had almost declared war on the Soviets on the occasion of the Russian invasion of Finland a year before. Now Hitler was determined to do what Britain had refrained from doing. With the taking of this fatal decision the war was lost for Germany.



## *Preparations, 1940-41*

In 1940, soon after the end of the Western campaign, the headquarters of Army Group B, commanded by Field-Marshal von Bock, was transferred to Posen. A little later the headquarters of Field-Marshal von Kluge's Fourth Army was set up in Warsaw. Hitherto only a handful of divisions, including our one cavalry division, had been scattered along our Eastern frontier. They were billeted over large areas, almost as though it were still peacetime, and only normal security measures were in force along the border. The Red Army, on the far side of the demarcation line which divided Poland, was behaving in an equally peaceful fashion. It was clear that neither side contemplated war. But once hostilities had ceased in France, German divisions began to be moved steadily and unobtrusively to the East.

Neither Field-Marshal von Kluge nor his staff received any indication of the possibility of war with Russia until January 1941. Then we were sent a cautiously worded order from Army Group at Posen, which discussed the possibility of a campaign in the East. It was vaguely phrased in general terms.

The actual plan for Operation *Barbarossa*, which was the code name for the invasion of Russia, was not issued until later. Meanwhile during the spring of 1941 more and more divisions were moved to the East, but in order to conceal their presence from the Russians they were stationed well back from the frontier. Preparations began to be intensified and skeleton staffs of other senior commands were set up in the East. Numerous map exercises and tactical discussions took place. As it became increasingly obvious that for Hitler war with the Soviets was inevitable, preparations were intensified by staffs at all levels.

A strange atmosphere prevailed during those months. In the first place we realized what this new war would entail. Many of us had fought in Russia as junior officers between 1914 and 1918, and we knew what to expect. There was uneasiness both among the staff officers and in the divisions. On the other hand duty demanded precise and detailed work. All books and maps concerning Russia soon disappeared from the bookshops. I remember that Kluge's desk at his Warsaw headquarters was usually laden with such publications. In particular, Napoleon's 1812 campaign was the subject of much study. Kluge read General de Caulaincourt's account of that campaign with the greatest attention: it revealed



the difficulties of fighting, and even living, in Russia. The places where the Grand Army had fought its battles and skirmishes were on the maps before us. We knew that we would soon be following in Napoleon's footsteps.

We also studied the Russo-Polish War of 1920. As Chief of Staff, Fourth Army, I delivered a series of lectures to our staff officers on this subject, illustrated by large maps. The Pripet Marshes had played an important part in that war. This vast area of swamp and forest, stretching from Brest-Litovsk almost to the Dnieper, and nearly as large as all Bavaria, was not quite as trackless as it used to be. We had fought our way across it during the First World War and were soon to do so again.

Our preparations for Operation *Barbarossa* were partially interrupted during the spring by the Balkan incident. Hitler, remembering Gallipoli, was afraid that the British might attempt another diversion in this corner of Europe. He envisaged a possible enemy landing in Greece, which would enable the British to push north through Bulgaria and attack the rear of Field-Marshal von Rundstedt's Army Group South as it advanced eastwards. To avoid this, and also to secure the Rumanian oil, he was anxious to strengthen the political and military ties which bound the Balkan states to Germany.

So far as Rumania went, General Antonescu was fully prepared to fall in with Hitler's plans, and a German military mission was sent to Bucharest to reorganize the Rumanian Army. Antonescu was anxious to win back Bessarabia, which the Russians had occupied in the previous year, and also hoped to annex part of the Ukraine. With these ends in view Rumania signed a full-scale pact of alliance with Germany.

The attitude of the Bulgarians was considerably more reserved, since they did not wish to antagonize either Britain or Germany. The bait Hitler offered them was Salonika and the lost territories in Thrace. After some hard dealing, the Bulgarians finally agreed to allow German troops through their country in order to attack the British in Greece.

In Albania the Greco-Italian War had reached a condition of stalemate, with the advantages rather on the Greek side. Yugoslavia was to give Hitler a nasty shock. As early as 1939 the Regent of that country, Prince Paul, had been received in Berlin with full honours. Hitler counted on his keeping his country at least benevolently neutral. But suddenly a revolutionary situation, inspired



apparently by London and Moscow, developed in Yugoslavia, the government of Prince Paul was overthrown, and the country ceased to be a potential ally. This immediately endangered the lines of communication of the German armies in Rumania and Bulgaria. Hitler acted swiftly. Yugoslavia was invaded and its brave army rapidly defeated. Mutual hostility between Serb and Croat contributed to this.

It is no part of this chapter to discuss in any detail the short Balkan campaign. Its importance, so far as Operation *Barbarossa* went, was that it delayed the launching of our offensive in Russia. Though the campaign was an exceedingly brief and successful one, the divisions diverted to the peninsula had to be moved back to their original jumping-off positions. In particular several important panzer units needed a thorough overhaul and partial re-equipment after their long march across the Greek mountains.

The initial date for the launching of Operation *Barbarossa* had been set for May 15th. This was the earliest date possible, since it was necessary to wait for the mud to dry after the spring thaws. Mechanized units would have bogged down in April, when every river and stream is swollen by the melting snow and when, indeed, large stretches of Western Russia are for all intents and purposes under water. The Balkan incident postponed the opening of the campaign by five and a half weeks.

As it happened, it would probably have had to be postponed in any case, since the thaw came late in 1941 and the River Bug, in Fourth Army's sector, overflowed its banks as late as early June. D-day was finally set for June 22nd, which corresponded almost exactly with the opening of Napoleon's offensive in 1812.

The Balkan campaign and the late thaw had lost us valuable weeks. Only a few months remained for mechanized operations. From June until late September conditions in Russia are particularly suited to mobile warfare. That is to say, we had some four months in all. In October the *Rasputitza*, or autumn mud period, sets in, and it is then extremely difficult to advance since heavy vehicles tend to bog down. The frost period, from November to February, once again favours military operations, but only if equipment, weapons and vehicles are specially designed for warfare in the extreme cold and if the troops are properly dressed and trained for fighting in such conditions—as is the Russian army.

Despite our intensive study of Russian conditions, we were surprised by the severity of the two mud-periods in the spring and



autumn. Here experience gained in the First World War was not only of no help but was actually misleading. In that war we had fought the Tsar's Army principally on Polish territory, not in the depths of Russia, where conditions are much intensified.

Finally, there was the question of our morale. There can be no doubt that commanders and troops alike felt uneasy at the prospect of this new campaign. The general attitude was that we were setting off into a mysterious, even an uncanny land, a land without end. However, this did not stop us from making the most thorough preparations. Everything that we could do before the campaign began was done to the best of our ability.

### *Russia and the Russians*

When appreciating an enemy's strength, it is wise to err on the side of caution, to assume that he may be stronger than he actually appears. Failure to do this can result in some very unpleasant surprises.

Eastern man is very different from his Western counterpart. He has a much greater capacity for enduring hardship, and this passivity induces a high degree of equanimity towards life and death. In the East the importance of the individual is not stressed to the same extent as in the West. Great losses are accepted almost with indifference. Eastern man does not possess much initiative; he is accustomed to take orders, to being led.

His way of life is simple, even primitive by our standards. Conditions are poor. In the cities the Bolshevists can point to great achievements since 1917, imposing buildings and modern streets. The villages, on the other hand, have not changed since the First World War and the countryman lives no better now than he did then. Most of the houses are of wood with thatched roofs in varying stages of decay. Furniture is sparse and wretched. But since the inhabitants know no better, they generally lack any ambition to improve their lot. They attach little importance to what they eat or wear. It is surprising how long they can survive on what to a Western man would be a starvation diet. The Russian lives very close to nature. Heat and cold do not affect him unduly. In the winter he will protect himself against the bitter weather with any means that come to hand, and he is a master of improvisation. He needs no complicated installations to keep warm. The Russian women are sturdily built and work as hard as the men. Close



contact with nature enables these people to move freely by night or in fog, through woods or across swamps. They are not afraid of the dark, nor of their endless forests, nor of the cold. They are accustomed to winters in which the thermometer frequently falls to 45 degrees of frost Centigrade.

The Siberian, who is partially or completely an Asiatic, is even tougher and has greater powers of resistance than his European compatriot. We had already learned this when we met the Siberian Army Corps during the First World War. To the Western European, accustomed to small countries, distances in the East seem endless. The citizen of the United States, who is used to thinking in terms of vast plains and prairies, would perhaps not share this feeling, which inevitably affects the European with a sensation akin to awe. This is reinforced by the melancholy and monotonous nature of the Russian landscape, which is particularly oppressive during the gloomy days of autumn and the interminable winter darkness. The Russian is much influenced by the country in which he lives, and it is my belief that the landscape is largely responsible for his passivity and monotony.

The psychological effect of the country on the ordinary German soldier was considerable. He felt small and lost in that endless space and he missed the happier life and higher state of civilization to which he was accustomed in his homeland. The soldiers from Eastern Germany were more easily acclimatized to this strange new world, for Eastern Germany is the link between Russia and the West. The others, however, also learned to adjust themselves, even as their fathers had done during the First World War. The Eastern theatre of operations became the true testing ground of our troops. It was a hard school: a man who has survived the Russian enemy and the Russian climate has little more to learn about war.

All the wars that Russia has fought have been savage and bloody. Frederick the Great learned to respect the quality of the Russian soldier during the Seven Years War. Napoleon considered the Battle of Borodino to be the bloodiest he ever fought. The Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 was ferocious, as was the Russo-Japanese one at the beginning of our century. In both these wars casualties were on a very heavy scale. During the First World War we learned to know the Imperial Russian Army at first hand. It is a significant and little-known fact that our casualties on the Eastern Front were greater than those suffered in the West during the 1914-18 war. In that war Russian leadership was certainly inferior to our own



and the tactics of their massive armies clumsy. But in defence the Imperial Russian Army was stubborn and tenacious and they were masters at constructing defensive positions with great speed. The Russian soldier showed great skill in night operations and in forest fighting, and he preferred hand-to-hand combat. His physical needs were slight and his ability to stand up to punishment unshaken truly astounding. Such was the soldier whom we had learned to know and respect a quarter of a century ago. Since then the Bolsheviks had systematically re-educated the youth of their country. It was logical to assume that the Red Army would prove an even tougher nut to crack than had been its Imperial predecessor.

The Russians had studied our past campaigns closely, and we expected that their senior commanders would have learned the lessons of our experience. In the middle and lower ranks, however, observers reported that their officers were still rather awkward and unskilled.

It was extremely difficult to form any clear picture of the Red Army's equipment. Their security had been both thorough and effective. Hitler refused to believe that Russia's industrial production could equal Germany's. Our greatest single lack of intelligence concerned Russian tanks. We had no idea what their monthly tank production figures might be.

Even maps were hard to come by, since the Russians regarded their geography as a military secret and safeguarded their maps accordingly. Those that we did have were not infrequently entirely incorrect and misleading.

As for Russian strength as a whole, no assessment was uniformly acceptable. In general those of us who had fought in Russia during the First World War regarded it as high, while those who did not know the new enemy tended to underestimate his powers.

The attitude to be expected from the civilian population was also largely unknown. In the 1914-18 war we had found them affectionate, loyal and good-natured. How they had changed in the intervening years no one could say. Those of us who knew them of old, however, believed that that amicable nation deserved a better government than the one under which they had been compelled to live for a quarter of a century.

### *Strategic Intentions*

In 1941 the German Army still consisted principally of infantry divisions which marched on foot with a horse-drawn supply train.



Only a small part of the Army was formed of armoured and motorized divisions. The principal problem, therefore, was how to cover the immense distances in the limited time at our disposal. The front, too, was vast, stretching from the Carpathians to the Baltic coast near Memel. The frontier was so drawn that any sort of encirclement or outflanking movement was not immediately possible. There was no alternative to a frontal attack.

We estimated Russian strength in June 1941 at 160 infantry divisions, 30 cavalry divisions and 35 motorized and armoured brigades. Of these, a portion were stationed on Russia's Far Eastern frontier. Total man-power available for mobilization was put at twelve millions. Russian tanks were believed numerically superior but technically inferior to ours. Other equipment was rated good. Neither the Red Air Force nor the Red Navy was regarded as in any way formidable. Our knowledge of the internal structure of the Red Army was defective.

Our principal strategic problem, as I have already stated, was how to defeat the enemy in the vast theatre of operations within the limited time available to us. We had a few months only, during which we must destroy the massive Russian armies west of the Rivers Dnieper and Dvina. Should they succeed in withdrawing behind those water barriers intact, we would be confronted with the same problem that had faced Napoleon in 1812. There would then be no telling when the war in the East would end.

Hitler's primary objectives were dictated on economic grounds. He wanted the rich grain lands of the Ukraine, the industrial area of the Donetz basin and, later, the Caucasian oil fields.

Brauchitsch and Halder saw the campaign from another point of view. They wished to eliminate the Red Army first and go for the economic prizes only when that had been achieved. However, both Hitler's plans and those of his top military advisers required that the bulk of the German forces be committed north of the Pripet Marshes. There two army groups would attack, the stronger being the right-hand one. Their task was to send forward their armour on the two flanks, to encircle the enemy west of the Upper Dnieper and the Dvina, and to prevent his escape eastward. Meanwhile other elements of Army Group North were to capture Leningrad, link up with the Finns and thus eliminate all Russian forces from the Baltic. Only then was Moscow to be attacked, from the west and north.



South of the Pripet Marshes Army Group South was to launch a frontal attack and advance eastwards.

Further planning was pointless, since the development of the campaign would automatically depend on the success of these initial operations. The differences between Hitler's point of view and that of the Army High Command thus remained unresolved when the battle began. This was to be the cause of much friction later in the summer, with the most unfortunate consequences.

Meanwhile, before describing our order of battle and our operational plans in detail, it might be of interest to quote the opinions of some of our senior officers, as expressed at this time.

Field-Marshal von Rundstedt, the commander of Army Group South and, after Manstein, the most talented general we had during the Second World War, gave me his views on the forthcoming battle in May of 1941. They can be summarized as follows:

'This war with Russia is a nonsensical idea, to which I can see no happy ending. But if, for political reasons, the war is unavoidable, then we must face the fact that it can't be won in a single summer campaign. Just look at the distances involved. We cannot possibly defeat the enemy and occupy the whole of western Russia, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, within a few short months. We should prepare for a long war and go for our objectives step by step. First of all a strong Army Group North should capture Leningrad and the area around it. This would enable us to link up with the Finns, eliminate the Red Fleet from the Baltic, and increase our influence in Scandinavia. The central and southern army groups should for the time being advance only to a line running Odessa-Kiev-Orsha-Lake Ilmen. Then, if we should find that we have sufficient time this year, Army Group North could advance south-east from Leningrad towards Moscow, while Army Group Centre moved eastwards on the capital. All further operations should be postponed until 1942, when we should make new plans based on the situation as it then is.'

My own immediate commander at Fourth Army was Field-Marshal von Kluge, who later led the Fourth Panzer Army in the main attack for Moscow. He expressed his opinion to me in these terms:

'Moscow is both the head and the heart of the Soviet system. Besides being the capital, it is also an important armaments centre. It is in addition the focal junction of the Russian rail network, particularly for those lines that lead to Siberia. The Russians are



bound to throw in strong forces to prevent our capture of the capital. Therefore it is my opinion that we should advance, with all the strength at our disposal, straight along the Moscow road via Minsk, Orsha and Smolensk. If we can capture this area before winter sets in, we'll have done quite enough for one year. We'll then have to consider what plans to make for 1942.'

Post-war comments by non-Germans are of interest. One theory is that we should have concentrated on capturing the Black Sea and the Baltic, by means of naval and air operations, with the Army playing only a secondary role. This would have had the effect of isolating Russia. However, such a plan was not really practicable, since our Navy and Air Force were too small. Furthermore, it was essential that we defeat Russia quickly. In view of Germany's geographical position, a long war must prove fatal to us. Only great naval powers can afford such protracted operations as this one must have proved, since they are for all intents and purposes unassailable and are not subject to economic strangulation.

My personal view of the situation was as follows:

We must capture the Moscow and Leningrad areas in 1941. We would then hold the enemy's capital, his principal rail centre and his two most important cities. This could be done if our maximum force were deployed in the sectors of Army Groups North and Centre. In this case the main task of Army Group South during the 1941 campaign would be simply to advance south of the Pripet marshes and cover the right flank of Army Group Centre. Any attempt to conquer all southern Russia this year would then be quite out of the question.

Each of these plans has its advantages and its disadvantages. The planning of military operations is a difficult science at the best of times: it is not made any easier when military decisions must be influenced by political and economic considerations.

### *The Men in Command*

The subject of this chapter is Moscow and I shall therefore confine myself to giving brief portraits of the men who were made responsible for the capture of the Russian capital. Although the operations of Army Group Centre were closely connected with those of Army Groups North and South, it is with Field-Marshal von Bock's Army Group Centre that we are here concerned.

Bock was one of our foremost military brains. Like Rundstedt and Manstein he had a talent for controlling operations on the



## MOSCOW

largest scale. He was a tall, slender man, a typical Prussian of the old school. During the First World War he had been for a time Chief Operations Officer at the headquarters of Army Group German Crown Prince, on the Western front. He was vivacious, often sarcastic, and expressed his thoughts clearly and well. He did not look his age and might have passed for a man of forty. However, his health was not perfect, for he suffered from frequent stomach pains.

Field-Marshal von Kluge was an impulsive, energetic leader of a traditional type. His talents were those of a tactician rather than a strategist. He did not smoke and only rarely touched alcohol. No matter how grave the situation, he always went to bed early and rose early. Like Rommel, he was happiest when he was with the troops in the very front line. Occasionally he would himself take control of operations at the front, which did not facilitate the work of his staff, though it must be said that he always saw to it that his chief of staff was kept informed about any orders he might have given on the spot. The Field-Marshal was passionately fond of aeroplanes and was very proud of his 'wings' which he had won during the First World War. In a joking sort of way he frequently compared himself with Napoleon's Marshal Ney. Like Ney, he was quite fearless, indeed oblivious to danger, and he never hesitated to fly or drive through the enemy's fire. When visiting the front he always took a tent, stove, food and water as well as an armoured command vehicle, wireless transmitter truck and one or more motor-cycle despatch riders. He was thus independent of his headquarters and could doss down wherever he might happen to find himself at nightfall. He was frequently wounded and was involved in numerous car and plane crashes. As a man he was inexhaustible, and his mood was always one of extreme determination.

Colonel-General Guderian commanded the Second Panzer Group which co-operated closely with Kluge's Fourth Army. Before the war he had been one of the creators of Germany's panzer forces and was considered a born leader of armour. All the vehicles of his group were marked with his initial, G, painted in white. He had made a great reputation for himself as an armoured force commander in Poland and again in France. He was not an easy man to deal with and at times could prove extremely stubborn. This is perhaps not a rare attribute of outstanding personalities. He was certainly a superb general and was very popular with the men of the armoured force.



Colonel-General Strauss commanded the Ninth Army, which operated to the north of Kluge's Fourth. He was a quiet, prudent and experienced commander. The armoured group which co-operated with his army was Colonel-General Hoth's Third Panzer Group. Hoth was also a most outstanding leader of armour. He was a calm, precise man.

Colonel-General Hoepner enters the story later, as commander of the Fourth Panzer Group. It was his forces which eventually got closest to Moscow. He too had a great reputation as an energetic leader.

Needless to say, during the course of the campaign differences of opinion frequently developed between the various generals. This did not prevent their staffs from working closely and harmoniously together. We always did what we could for one another, loyally and to the best of our abilities.

### *German Order of Battle, June 1941*

*Army Group South:* Field-Marshal von Rundstedt had under his command four armies and General von Kleist's First Panzer Group. From right to left these were the German-Rumanian Eleventh Army in the Jassy area; a Hungarian army in the Carpathian Mountains; General von Stülpnagel's Seventeenth Army north of the Carpathians and General von Reichenau's Sixth Army between the Seventeenth and Lublin. Kleist's Panzer Group was located west of Tomaszow in Galicia.

The task of Army Group South was to move eastwards, south of the Pripet Marshes, with concentration of effort in its left wing and objective Kiev.

*Army Group Centre:* The composition and dispositions of Field-Marshal von Bock's army group will be given in detail later. It was aligned north of the Pripet marshes and was to advance on Moscow.

*Army Group North:* Field-Marshal Ritter von Leeb had General Busch's Sixteenth and General Küchler's Eighteenth Armies, as well as Hoepner's Fourth Panzer Group. It was drawn up between Suwalki and Memel, whence it was to march on Leningrad and then turn south.

*Air Force:* Each army group had an air fleet assigned to its support. These were the 4th Air Fleet, Colonel-General Löhr, with Army Group South; the 2nd Air Fleet, which was the strongest

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of the three, under Field-Marshal Kesselring in support of Army Group Centre; the 1st Air Fleet, Colonel-General Koller, with Army Group North.

*Strengths:* On June 21, 1941, the German High Command had at its disposal about 135 divisions. Most of these were on, or on their way to, the Eastern Front, namely 80 infantry divisions, 15 motorized infantry divisions, 17 panzer divisions and 1 cavalry division: there were also a few security divisions intended to garrison the territory we expected to occupy.

Army Group South had 25 infantry divisions, 4 motorized divisions, 5 panzer divisions, and 4 mountain infantry divisions. These were all German units. In addition it contained a Hungarian corps, a Slovak division and, later, an Italian corps. Marshal Antonescu's Rumanian Army was under Field-Marshal von Rundstedt's command operationally. This army group faced numerically stronger Russian forces commanded by Marshal Budenny.

Army Group Centre, the strongest of the three, contained 30 infantry divisions, 15 panzer or motorized divisions and the cavalry division. Facing this army group were the forces commanded by Marshal Timoshenko, which were slightly the stronger numerically.

Army Group North comprised only 21 infantry and 6 panzer or motorized divisions. It was heavily outnumbered by the Russian forces in this sector, which were commanded by Marshal Voroshilov.

Our three air fleets counted in all some twelve hundred machines.

### *Order of Battle, Army Group Centre*

A few days before June 21st, the senior commands had moved up to their respective battle headquarters. The Central Army Group, consisting of the Fourth and Ninth Armies and the Second and Third Panzer Groups (formations larger than a corps, but lacking the status of an army), constituted the force that was to advance on and capture the Soviet capital. It is with this force, and particularly with Fourth Army and the two panzer groups, that we will henceforth be concerned.

Zero-hour was fixed for 03.30 hours on June 22nd. By then the commander-in-chief of Army Group Centre had moved with his staff to Warsaw, while Kluge and the staff of Fourth Army had left the former Polish capital and were now located just west of



Brest-Litovsk. Guderian and Hoth with their staffs were closer to the demarcation line.

Kluge, when examining our dispositions, remarked:

'We look very thin on the ground and, as you see, there are no powerful reserves such as we had in the Western campaign. The farther east we go, the wider the front must become and the thinner our line will be. Therefore it is essential that our troops remain well concentrated, even at the risk of gaps appearing between ourselves and the flanking armies.'

This was an exact summary of the situation. The shape of European Russia is such that our advance was, as it were, to take us out of a funnel or along a widening corridor of land between the Baltic and the Black Seas.

Our operational strategy was as follows. The two panzer groups were stationed on the flanks of the two armies, Guderian's on the right of the Fourth Army, in the Brest-Litovsk area, Hoth's on the left of the Ninth, west of Suwalki. These two armoured groups were to break through the enemy lines and advance with all speed on Minsk, where they were to meet in a giant pincer movement, encircling as many Russian troops as possible. Meanwhile the infantry corps of Fourth and Ninth Armies were to carry out more limited encircling movements designed to destroy the Red Army forces on or close to the frontier. Weak forces were assigned to hold the right flank, which was already protected by the Pripet marshes. Such then was our basic plan.

### *Zero Hour*

Tension rose steadily on the German side. By the evening of the 21st we assumed that the Russians must have realized what was happening, yet across the River Bug on the front of Fourth Army and Second Panzer Group, that is to say between Brest-Litovsk and Lomza, all was quiet. The Russian outposts were behaving quite normally. At a little after midnight, when the entire artillery of the assault divisions and of the second wave too was already zeroed in on its targets, the international Berlin-Moscow train passed without incident through Brest-Litovsk. It was a weird moment.

Three hours later we watched the German fighter planes take off and soon only their tail lights were visible in the East. Field-Marshal von Kluge and his staff were in the sector of the 31st

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Infantry Division, north-west of Brest-Litovsk and a few miles from the Bug. As 03.30, which was zero hour, approached, the sky began to lighten, turning to a curious yellow colour. And still all was quiet.

At 03.30 hours our entire artillery opened up. And then what seemed a miracle happened. The Russian artillery failed to respond. Only very rarely did a gun open fire from the far bank. Within a few hours the assault divisions were across the Bug, tanks were being ferried over, pontoon bridges were being built, and this almost entirely without any interference on the part of the enemy. There could be no doubt that Fourth Army and Second Panzer Group had achieved complete surprise.

The tactical break-through was equally successful and almost at once our armour had penetrated the Russian frontier defences and was headed east across open country. Only the citadel of Brest-Litovsk, which contained a G.P.U. school, put up a fanatical resistance for several days.

In order to get as quickly as possible to the Battle of Moscow, I shall deal with the mobile operations of the next months as briefly as I can.

### *The Bialystok-Slonim Pocket*

As I say, the Russians were clearly taken entirely by surprise on our front. Almost at once our signals intercept service listened in to a Russian message, 'We are being fired on. What shall we do?' They heard the reply from the senior headquarters to whom this request for orders was addressed. 'You must be insane. And why is your signal not in code?' Army Group South, on the other hand, came up against strong resistance at once and heavy fighting developed there immediately.

With us, however, all went according to plan. The two panzer groups drove east, then turned inwards, though General Guderian continued east with a part of his force, regardless of the encirclement battle which was raging in what was now his rear. He drove hard for Minsk, since it was essential that we prevent the enemy from escaping across the successive river lines, the Berezina, the Dnieper and the Dvina.

The infantry had a hard time keeping up. Marches of twenty-five miles in the course of a day were by no means exceptional, and that over the most atrocious roads. A vivid picture which remains of these weeks is the great clouds of yellow dust kicked up by the



Russian columns attempting to retreat and by our infantry hastening in pursuit. The heat was tremendous, though interspersed with sudden showers which quickly turned the roads to mud before the sun reappeared and as quickly baked them into crumbling clay once again.

By July 2nd the first battle was for all intents and purposes won. The haul was astounding, 150,000 prisoners taken, some 1,200 tanks and 600 guns captured or destroyed. First impressions revealed that the Russian was as tough a fighter as ever. His tanks, however, were not particularly formidable and his air force, so far as we could see, non-existent.

The conduct of the Russian troops, even in this first battle, was in striking contrast to the behaviour of the Poles and of the Western allies in defeat. Even when encircled, the Russians stood their ground and fought. The vast extent of the country, with its forests and swamps, helped them in this. There were not enough German troops available completely to seal off a huge encirclement such as that of Bialystok-Slonim. Our motorized forces fought on or near to the roads: in the great trackless spaces between them the Russians were left largely unmolested. This was why the Russians were able not infrequently to break out of our encirclements, whole columns moving by night through the forests that stretched away eastwards. They always attempted to break out to the east, so that the eastern side of each encirclement had to be held by our strongest troops, usually panzer troops. Nevertheless, our encirclements were seldom entirely successful.

The speed of our advance is exemplified by the fact that Fourth Army headquarters had to move twice within the first four days in order to remain reasonably close to operations. On the 24th we moved to Kamenets-Litevski and on the 26th to Pruzana.

### *The Battle of Minsk and the Breaking of the Stalin Line*

Before the great battle of Minsk and the penetration of the Stalin line, Army Group Centre had undergone a basic reorganization.

Even as in the old days massed cavalry would advance far ahead of the infantry armies to exploit a break-through, so now it was decided to combine Hoth's and Guderian's panzer groups and send them as far east as possible. A new headquarters was created to command this mass of armour, with Field-Marshal von Kluge in

charge of the whole operation. He took with him the staff of Fourth Army, which was renamed Fourth Panzer Army. Meanwhile the old Fourth Army became the Second Army on July 2nd, under Colonel-General Freiherr von Weichs, with headquarters at Pruzana. We moved forwards to Minsk, where we arrived on the 3rd to take up our new duties.

The fierce battle of Minsk was raging, but we left the infantry to clear up the great encirclement and pushed on for the Dnieper and Dvina. It was during this advance, between the 2nd and 11th of July, that the terrain first caused our tanks any serious trouble. The Berezina proved a difficult river to cross. The approaches were swampy, the main bridges had all been blown and the secondary ones which remained were flimsy wooden affairs. The Russians fought hard in this swampy terrain, and for the first time we began to encounter mines in large quantities. All this slowed down the tanks and enabled the infantry, after the battle of Minsk had been completed, to catch up with the armoured forces once more.

But Hoth and Guderian were not to be slowed down for long. Despite the difficulties enumerated above Guderian reached the Dnieper on either side of Mogilev and Orsha with remarkable speed, while to the north Hoth made equally good time in his race for the Dvina at Vitebsk and Polotsk. By so doing the armour had reached the so-called Stalin Line, which was the main Russian defensive position.

However, this line was not fortified throughout its whole length nor were there enough Russian troops to man it adequately despite reinforcements sent from the east. Guderian and Hoth were soon across the Dnieper and the Dvina respectively. And the way into Russia was open.

On July 8th the staff of Fourth Panzer Army moved to Borisov on the Berezina. Here we found traces of Napoleon. It was a few miles north of Borisov that the Grand Army was compelled to cross the frozen river during the winter of 1812 and suffered such appalling casualties. When the water is clear the remains of the props driven into the river bed to support the bridges built by the French engineers are still visible.

### *The Battle of Smolensk*

After the Second Panzer Group had crossed the Dnieper and the Third the Dvina, Russian resistance grew stiffer. They moved



strong reinforcements from the east and attempted to recapture the Stalin Line. Details of the battle cannot be given here. Suffice it to say that Russian tactics now were usually to attack the flanks of our armoured columns. These engagements continued from the 12th to the 30th of July and even in August there were occasional sporadic outbursts of fighting in the area.

The most important of these battles was the great Smolensk encirclement. While the mass of the two panzer groups continued eastwards and elements warded off the Russian attacks against their flanks, smaller forces were detached to seal the eastern boundary of the Smolensk pocket. The two infantry armies had, after terrific marches, at last caught up again. They held the other three sides of the pocket while our armour blocked the exit near Yartsevo. Once again this operation was not completely successful. Enemy forces, attacking at night, broke through to the east. Armoured forces were not suitable for operations of this sort, particularly in the swampy lands bordering the Dneiper.

On July 13th Field-Marshal von Kluge's headquarters had moved from Borisov to Tolochin. There we were visited by the Japanese ambassador to Berlin, General Oshima. We had been particularly instructed to make sure that he ran into no danger. However, he insisted on seeing the Dnieper, near Orsha, and was promptly caught in an artillery barrage. But he was quite unhurt and returned as proud as Punch to our headquarters, where he showed Field-Marshal von Kluge his *Samurai* sword.

On July 10th the 29th Motorized Division captured Smolensk, the most important Russian town so far to fall into our hands. On the 24th we moved yet again, and now we established our headquarters under canvas in a forest south-west of Smolensk and only a few miles from the front. The old high road which Napoleon had followed to Moscow was not far away.

In late July and early August precious weeks were largely wasted while our High Command debated what strategy we should now pursue. It has already been said that Hitler was anxious to secure the great economic prizes, the Ukraine, the Donetz basin and finally the Caucasus. These, however, all lay within the sector of Army Group South. His secondary objective had been Leningrad, which at this stage of the campaign seemed about to fall, and which probably would have fallen had Hitler not repeated his blunder of the previous year at Dunkirk and ordered Field-Marshal von Leeb to stop his tanks immediately outside the city.



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He was much less interested in Moscow. Indeed his original plan was to halt Army Group Centre along the line of the Desna and to the north, transfer a sizeable portion of its forces to Army Group South, and make no further attempt to advance on Moscow this year.

With this end in view, Fourth Panzer Army was dissolved. Field-Marshal von Kluge's staff was withdrawn into the reserve and the two Panzer Groups once again received their orders direct from Army Group Centre. It was proposed that Kluge be now given a command to control Guderian's Panzer Corps and a new infantry army. This force was to advance south-eastwards into the sector of Army Group South, and destroy the very strong enemy forces massed there.

The Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch, and his Chief of the General Staff, General Halder, were both strongly opposed to this plan. Brauchitsch would have preferred to see Army Group Centre go on straight for Moscow, which he regarded as the prime objective of the whole campaign. Field-Marshal von Bock and the staff of Army Group Centre shared this point of view. Field-Marshal von Kluge, on the other hand, was inclined to prefer Hitler's strategic concept. There were sharp exchanges of opinion and weeks passed before a decision was reached.

Meanwhile fighting went on between the Dnieper and the Desna and also between the Dvina and Upper Dnieper. Gradually a fairly firm line was established, running along the line of the Desna east of Roslavl and Yelnya and west of Dorogobuzh. This line was held by the troops of the old Fourth Army and joined the line held by the Ninth Army to the north. The Fourth Army was now re-constituted and Field-Marshal von Kluge once again given the command. He took his staff with him and so we were now in charge of the Desna line.

The second half of August and September saw fighting by the Fourth Army along the Desna and by the Ninth Army along the Dnieper north of Dorogobuzh. Guderian's Second Panzer Group was fighting with the Second Army, to our south, while Hoth's Third Panzer Group was now with Ninth Army. Without any considerable armoured support, we were reduced to trench warfare along the Desna, which made very heavy demands on the troops. The Russians attacked violently and over and over again succeeded in breaking through our thinly held lines. Tank units had to be called in to make good the damage. This taught us that in modern



warfare infantry requires armoured support not only in the attack but also in the defence.

When I say that our lines were thin, this is an understatement. Divisions were assigned sectors almost twenty miles wide. Furthermore, in view of the heavy casualties already suffered in the course of the campaign, these divisions were usually under strength and tactical reserves were non-existent. In the fighting, particularly around Yelnya, further heavy casualties were suffered by our divisions.

In addition to differences of opinion concerning strategy between Hitler and his top military advisers, there were actual disagreements concerning tactics. The great encirclement battles had led to the capture of huge numbers of prisoners and vast quantities of booty. But the results were not quite as satisfactory as they might appear at first glance. For one thing these great encirclements made very heavy demands on our panzer forces. For another, they were seldom entirely successful and large groups of the encircled enemy frequently slipped out of the pockets eastwards. Hitler therefore wished these encircling tactics to be carried out on a smaller scale, believing that the manœuvre could thus be made one hundred per cent successful.

In September our future strategy was finally decided, and along the lines recommended by Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch. We were to go for Moscow. The question which now arose was whether sufficient time still remained for us to capture the distant capital with the weakened forces at our disposal before the Russian winter set in. We were to pay dearly for the weeks wasted in futile argument during August and early September.

At last the definite order arrived. Army Group Centre was to attack towards Moscow, the operation to begin on October 2nd. So the cards were down, the big battle about to begin. The overture was to be the classic battle of Vyasma.

### *The Battle of Vyasma*

While the German Supreme Command debated what we should do, the Russians built a new defensive line along the upper Dnieper and the Desna opposite Army Group Centre. This line was the outermost ring of the defences covering Moscow.

Our task was now to break this ring, carry out a double encirclement of the enemy and then march into Moscow before the winter began.

Our troops were drawn up as follows. At Bryansk and to the



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south Second Army, with Guderian's Second Panzer Group, was assembled for a thrust to Orel and thence north. On their left flank Kluge's Fourth Army with Hoepner's Fourth Panzer Group was ready. Its left flank was along the upper Dnieper east of Smolensk. This reinforced army was to make the main thrust for Moscow. North of the upper Dnieper was Strauss's Ninth Army with Hoth's Third Panzer Group in support. As in the original battles east of the Bug, Hoepner's and Hoth's Panzer Groups were massed on the outside flanks of their respective infantry armies. These two tank forces were once again to drive east, then turn inwards to encircle Vyasma. The infantry armies were to repeat the tactics which had proved so successful before and were to carry out smaller encirclements within the larger armoured pincer movement. Once the pincers had met the panzer groups were, so far as possible, to ignore the encirclement battle which would develop in their rear at Vyasma and were to push on with maximum strength and all speed for Moscow.

The attack was launched at first light on October 2nd. Kluge's and Strauss's reinforced armies assaulted with a precision that was truly remarkable. All movements exactly followed the calculations of the General Staff. The result of this textbook battle, fought between the 2nd and the 13th of October, was that Army Group Centre captured 650,000 prisoners and the Russians lost 5,000 guns and 1,200 tanks.

The number of prisoners taken, and of war material captured or destroyed by Army Group Centre since the opening of hostilities was assuming astronomical proportions. The same story was repeated in the sectors of Army Groups North and South. It is hardly surprising that Hitler, his commanders and the troops themselves now believed that the Red Army must be nearing the end of its resources both in manpower and in weapons. Prisoners told us that this new attack, launched so late in the year, had been completely unexpected. Moscow seemed about to fall into our hands. Great optimism prevailed in Army Group Centre, and from Field-Marshal von Bock to the privates at the front we all believed and hoped that we would soon be marching through the streets of the Russian capital. Hitler, indeed, had already set up a special engineer command whose task was to be the demolition of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, it was a pity that the Propaganda Ministry saw fit to make a bombastic statement announcing that the war in the East was won and the Red Army practically annihilated.



In order fully to understand the approaching drama, it is necessary to understand the mental condition, both of commanders and troops, at this moment of time. Since June 22nd the armies had fought one successful battle after the other, and had advanced over terrible roads in all weathers, from the Bug to the neighbourhood of Moscow. Since most of the armies marched on foot with horse-drawn transport, this feat of marching alone is surely most impressive. And it had all been done in some three and a half months, several weeks of which had been wasted while the High Command debated strategy. On October 12th, when the Battle of Vyasma was over save for minor, sporadic fighting, we might well look back on our past achievements with pride, and forward with confidence.

In mid-October all the armies set off for Moscow. Our headquarters, which had been at Roslavl when the Vyasma battle began, had moved forward to Spas Demensk on the 6th of October and to Yukhnov on the 10th. A few days later the whole of Army Group Centre was on the march eastwards. All that lay between us and the capital was the so-called Moscow Defensive Position. We had no reason to believe that this would prove a particularly difficult nut to crack. Once we were through that, the road, we thought, would be open.

### *A Change of Mood*

And now, when Moscow itself was almost in sight, the mood both of commanders and troops changed. With amazement and disappointment we discovered in late October and early November that the beaten Russians seemed quite unaware that as a military force they had almost ceased to exist. During these weeks enemy resistance stiffened and the fighting became more bitter with each day that passed. Marshal Zhukov had now assumed command of the troops covering Moscow. For weeks his men had been constructing a defensive position in depth which ran through the forests that bordered the Nara from Serpukhov in the south to Naro-Fominsk and thence north. Skilfully camouflaged strong points, wire entanglements and thick minefields now filled the forests which covered the western approach to Moscow.

Strong armies had been formed from the remnants of those which had been defeated farther west and from fresh formations. The Moscow workers had been called out. New army corps were arriving from Siberia. Most of the embassies and legations as well as part of the Russian Government had been evacuated from



Moscow and gone east. But Stalin with his small personal staff remained in the capital which he was determined never to surrender. All this came as a complete surprise to us, nor could we believe that the situation would change dramatically after all our exertions and when the prize seemed almost within our grasp. The troops not unnaturally now resented the bombastic utterances of our propaganda in October.

One began to hear sarcastic references to the military leaders far away in Germany. The troops felt that it was high time our political leaders came and had a look at the front. Our soldiers were overtired now, our units under strength. This was particularly so among the infantry, where many companies were reduced to a mere sixty or seventy men. The horses, too, had suffered grievously and the artillery had difficulty in moving its guns. The number of serviceable tanks in the panzer divisions was far below establishment. Since Hitler had believed that the campaign was over, he had ordered that industry at home cut down on its production of munitions. Only a trickle of replacements reached the fighting units. Winter was about to begin, but there was no sign of any winter clothing to be seen anywhere.

The lines of communication with Germany, fantastically long and extremely tenuous, were scarcely adequate to keep the armies fed with ammunition and essential supplies. The broad-gauge Russian railways had to be re-laid to carry our European locomotives before we could make use of them. Far behind the front the first partisan units were beginning to make their presence felt in the vast forests and swamps. We generally lacked the means to combat them. Supply columns were frequently ambushed, and the front-line troops suffered privations in consequence.

And now the ghosts of the Grand Army and the memory of Napoleon's fate began to haunt our dreams. General de Caulaincourt's memoirs were always on Field-Marshal von Kluge's desk: it was his bible. Comparisons with 1812 multiplied. But all such intangible omens paled in comparison with the mud-period or *Rasputitza* which now came to plague us.

We had anticipated this, of course, for we had read about it in our studies of Russian conditions. But the reality far exceeded our worst expectations. In the Vyasma area it began, slowly enough, in mid-October and became steadily more intense until mid-November. It is hard to convey a picture of what it was like to anybody who has not actually experienced it. There are only very few



metalled roads in this part of the world. All others, and the open country too, become a sticky morass. The infantryman slithers in the mud, while many teams of horses are needed to drag each gun forward. All wheeled vehicles sink up to their axles in the slime. Even tractors can only move with great difficulty. A large proportion of our heavy artillery was soon stuck fast and was therefore unavailable for the Moscow battle. The quality of the mud may be understood when it is realized that even tanks and other tracked vehicles could only just get along and were frequently and repeatedly mired. The strain that all this caused our already exhausted troops can perhaps be imagined.

We were confronted with another and equally unpleasant surprise at this time. The first Russian T34 tanks appeared during the Battle of Vyasma. In 1941 this was a most spectacular A.F.V. which could only be dealt with by other tanks or by the artillery: it was impervious to the infantry's anti-tank weapons, for at that time our infantry was equipped only with 37 mm. and 50 mm. anti-tank guns. These had been capable of knocking out the Russian tanks we had hitherto encountered but they had no effect on the T34. Thus a very serious state of affairs arose for the infantry divisions, which felt themselves naked and defenceless against this new tank. A gun of at least 75 mm. calibre was needed, and such a gun had first to be built. At Vereya the Russian tanks simply drove straight through the 7th Infantry Division to the artillery positions and literally ran over the guns. The effect on the infantryman's morale was comprehensible. This marked the beginning of what came to be called the 'tank terror.'

We had already seen a captured order of the day, signed by Marshal Timoshenko. This had clearly been written with the intention of encouraging his troops after their many defeats, and it listed the alleged weaknesses of the Germans. Timoshenko told his men that the Germans' chief strength lay in their technical skill and in their equipment. The German soldier, he said, was inferior to the Russian in man-to-man combat, and became nervous and timid when fighting at night or in the great forests and marshes. In this sort of warfare the Russian was the better soldier. Of course this was not quite accurate: had it been, we would not now have been at the gates of Moscow. Nevertheless this Russian order did contain a grain of truth. The Western European is so highly civilized that in many respects he cannot stand up to the tougher Easterner who lives so much closer to nature.



Our Air Force had fought superbly. Now, however, the number of serviceable aircraft had declined, and there was also a shortage of landing fields near the front, particularly during the mud period. Owing to the condition of the ground, there were many accidents during take-off and landing. The Russian Air Force had scarcely put in an appearance as yet.

On October 26th Field-Marshal von Kluge moved his battle headquarters forward once again, this time from Yukhnov to a location beyond Maloyaroslavets, close behind the fighting where Kluge liked to have his command post. Later, as we shall see, his staff was very nearly taken prisoner during the great Russian counter-offensive. Napoleon, incidentally, had passed through Maloyaroslavets in 1812.

By the end of October our sector of the weakened German front followed the course of the River Oka from Aleksin north, then that of the Nara to Naro-Fominsk, after which it turned north-west across the main road and the Moskau towards Ruza and Volokolamsk. And this marked, at least for the time being, the limit of our advance, for our offensive ability was exhausted. The troops were weakened and weary. Opposite us the Russians held their position in depth in the forests covering Moscow. Part of our artillery and heavy vehicles were stuck in the mud, often far behind the front somewhere between Vyasma and the Nara. But Moscow was within our grasp. At night we could see the Russian anti-aircraft shells bursting above their capital. What was to happen next?

### *The Orsha Conference*

In November the Chief of the General Staff summoned the chiefs of staff of the three army groups and also of the armies engaged on the Eastern Front to attend a conference at Orsha on the Dnieper. The fateful question to be discussed was whether the German armies in the east should now dig in along the line of the present front and there await the renewal of decent campaigning weather in the spring, or whether the three army groups should continue to attack during the winter months.

The representative of Rundstedt's Army Group South was against further offensive operations and in favour of going over to the defensive. Army Group North was so weak that there could be no question of fresh attacks being mounted in this area. Army Group Centre, however, spoke in favour of making one last



attempt to capture Moscow. Furthermore, once the capital was in our hands, it should be possible for individual panzer divisions, operating east of the city, to cut the main rail communications with Siberia.

The division of opinion was very simple. On the one hand there was the attractive prospect of reaching the Kremlin: on the other, doubts as to the ability of our troops to complete this final thrust in view of their weakened condition.

### *The Last Attempt*

After this conference immediate and detailed discussions took place with the actual commanders in the field. Field-Marshal von Kluge repeatedly visited his front-line units and even asked our privates and N.C.O.s for their opinion.

In man-power and equipment we remained weak, for we received little in the way of replacements or weapons. On the other hand since the end of October the divisions had managed to obtain a certain amount of rest in the positions which they held facing Moscow. Only the right wing of Fourth Army had been subjected to constant enemy attacks coming from the area of Serpukhov and along either side of the Podolsk-Maloyaroslavets road. Our front was thinly held here on the right, and our troops had only been able to defeat these attacks with difficulty.

For hours on end the commanders-in-chief discussed the situation. The final decision was that one last attempt would be made, one final attack launched, with Moscow as objective. The Supreme Command was well aware that this could not begin before the end of the mud period, when the soil would be frozen solid once again.

### *Dispositions*

The army designated to attack the actual Moscow area was Field-Marshal von Kluge's Fourth Army, which was reinforced for the purpose.

Our right flank, from the Oka to the Nara, was held only by light covering forces. To the south of the Oka General Guderian's Second Panzer Group, operating with Second Army, was to advance through Tula and north-east. The bulk of Fourth Army was assembled along the Nara, between the Podolsk-Maloyaroslavets road and the Moscow-Smolensk highway. North of the highway and of the Moscow river General Hoepner's Fourth Panzer Group

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was assembled between Ruza and Volokolamsk: Hoepner was subordinate to Field-Marshal von Kluge. A number of infantry corps were also assigned to Hoepner, since past experience had shown that in these circumstances combined operations by armour and infantry produced the best results.

Our plan of operations was that the reinforced Fourth Panzer Group, attacking northwards on the left of the highway, should swing east and go for Moscow from the west and north-west, while Fourth Army, attacking across the Nara, kept the enemy pinned down on this front.

*The Last Offensive*

By mid-November the mud period was over and frost heralded the approach of winter. Both the roads and the open country were now passable for vehicles of all kinds. Tractors extricated the heavy artillery from the mud far behind the front and one gun after another was towed forward. It happened, however, that in the process of dragging these guns out of the ground into which many had become frozen fast, a number of them were literally torn to pieces.

The first few days of Fourth Panzer Group's attack produced satisfactory results. The enemy was steadily pushed back eastwards in heavy fighting. Farther to the north Colonel-General Reinhardt's Third Panzer Group was also attacking. Field-Marshal von Kluge exercised command over both these panzer groups as well as over the Fourth Army. This gave him a total force of eleven army corps, with thirty-five divisions, nine of which were panzer divisions. But of course these formations were all below strength both in men and in weapons.

Then, about the 20th of November, the weather suddenly broke and almost overnight the full fury of the Russian winter was upon us. The thermometer suddenly dropped to thirty degrees of frost. This was accompanied by heavy falls of snow. Within a few days the countryside presented the traditional picture of a Russian winter. With steadily decreasing momentum and increasing difficulty the two panzer groups continued to battle their way towards Moscow. By throwing in their last ounce of strength they managed to push through Klin, and the armoured vanguard reached the Moskova-Volga canal. At this point their northern flank was suddenly attacked by fresh Russian formations which had moved across from the east bank of the canal.



In the direct advance on Moscow our leading units reached Oseretkoye during the last days of November, and armoured reconnaissance troops even penetrated the capital's outermost western suburbs. With that the last offensive powers of the two Panzer Groups ground to a final halt in ice and snow.

Such was the position on the evening of November 28th, when Colonel-General Hoepner asked Field-Marshal von Kluge to order an attack towards Moscow by the Fourth Army along the Nara. Such an attack, he said, would relieve the pressure on the two panzer groups and would attract Russian forces from their front to that of the infantry army. After considering this request in all its gravity with myself as his chief of staff, the Field-Marshal issued the orders for the attack on the 29th: it was launched on the very next day, the 30th, in the morning. The point of main effort lay on either side of Naro-Fominsk. A panzer corps supported the southern wing of the attacking army. A unified attack went in, according to plan, and within the next few days the infantry succeeded in penetrating the deeply echeloned Russian defensive positions in the forests along the Nara at several points. But by December 2nd it was apparent that here too the forces at our disposal were no longer adequate to the task assigned them. Only the Reconnaissance Battalion of the 258th Infantry Division succeeded in finding a gap in the enemy line. It drove straight forward throughout the long hours of darkness and nearly reached the south-western outskirts of Moscow. But there it was attacked, early on the morning of December 3rd, by Russian tanks and by workers from the Moscow factories.

Field-Marshal von Kluge now decided to call off the attack, which had become hopeless and which could only result in unnecessary casualties. In the course of the following night, therefore, he ordered all of Fourth Army south of the highway to withdraw into its original positions behind the Nara. This disengagement was successfully completed, the enemy only following with caution.

Field-Marshal von Kluge's decision was the correct one in the circumstances. Within the next few days Marshal Zhukov was to launch the great Russian counter-offensive which began on December 6th and was initially directed against the two panzer groups north-west of Moscow. The turning-point in the East had been reached: our hopes of knocking Russia out of the war in 1941 had been dashed, at the very last minute.

It was essential now that Germany's political leaders should



realize that the days of the *Blitzkrieg* were over. We were facing an army which had to be evaluated at a far higher rate than any we had yet met. On the other hand it must be stressed that the German Army, troops and commanders alike, showed an equal fortitude in facing the disasters and dangers which now confronted us.

Every soldier outside Moscow knew that this was a battle for life or death. If the Russians succeeded in defeating us here, there could be no hope. In 1812 Napoleon had at least returned with the shattered remnants of his Grand Army. In 1941 the choice for the Germans was only to hold fast or to be annihilated. Russian propaganda took the form of postcards, dropped from the air. These bore crude pictures of the snow-covered Russian plains dotted with the corpses of German soldiers. Such propaganda made no impression on our troops.

Four battalions of French volunteers assigned to Fourth Army proved less hardy. Field-Marshal von Kluge addressed them on the field of Borodino and spoke of how, in Napoleon's Grand Army, Frenchmen and Germans had once before fought shoulder to shoulder against the common enemy. Unfortunately, though they fought bravely when sent into action on the following day, the Frenchmen could not stand up to the fierceness of the enemy's attack, nor to the cold and blizzards so unlike anything they had ever known at home. The French Legion was overrun and suffered heavily both from the enemy and from the cold. Within a few days it had to be withdrawn from the front and sent back to the west.

### *State of the Armies*

Before glancing at the events which follow, it is essential to form a picture of the troops, both German and Russian, which fought outside Moscow in December of 1941, and of the conditions in which the battle raged.

Only for a few hours each day was there limited visibility at the front. Until nine o'clock in the morning the wintry landscape was shrouded in a thick fog. Gradually a red ball, the sun, became visible in the eastern sky and by about eleven it was possible to see a little. At three o'clock in the afternoon dusk set in, and an hour later it was almost completely dark again.

There was a useful airfield at Maloyaroslavets where transport planes from Smolensk, Orsha or Warsaw occasionally arrived. They brought small numbers of replacements, but these were quite



inadequate to compensate for our daily casualty lists. The replacements often wore long trousers and laced boots, without so much as an overcoat or a blanket. The transport columns of the divisions, frozen solid, waited at the airfield. The replacements were rushed forward to the front, where their arrival was urgently awaited. They would often be sent into the front line that same night. Thus men who, two days ago, had been living in well-appointed barracks in Warsaw often found themselves, within forty-eight hours, thrown into the crumbling front outside Moscow.

When, in late summer, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch had realized that the war in the East would go on into the winter, he had urged Hitler that arrangements be made in time to ensure a proper supply of winter clothing and winter equipment for the troops in Russia. Hitler had declined to do this, because of his firm conviction that the Russians would be defeated before the cold weather set in. Now it was suddenly realized even at Hitler's headquarters that the war in the East was in fact only beginning; and, horrifying though it was, that the German troops would have to fight the ferocious battles to come without proper winter clothing. Hitler now issued drastic orders for the despatch of such clothing to the East. In Germany collections of furs and so on were made on a huge scale and in fact a great deal was accomplished along these lines with remarkable speed. However, it was too late. Months must pass before the clothing thus collected could actually reach the troops. So the soldiers had to spend their first winter in Russia, fighting heavily, and equipped only with their summer uniform, greatcoat and blanket. What was available in Russia itself in the way of felt boots, fur caps and woollen underclothes was commandeered, but this was only a drop in the ocean and scarcely affected the condition of the mass of our soldiers.

Supplies were usually short. Only a few railways ran into the area behind the front. These were frequently cut by the partisans. The water froze inside the boilers of the engines, which were not built to withstand the Russian climate. Each engine could draw only half the normal number of wagons. Many of them became stuck for days on end in the snow and ice. Our urgent requests for artillery shells could scarcely be met. Yet in order to encourage the soldiers on the Eastern Front trainloads of red wine were shipped to us from France and Germany. The anger of a unit which received a trainload of wine instead of the shells it urgently needed can be readily imagined. Even as wine such a cargo was frequently useless.



At forty degrees Centigrade below zero, not an unusual temperature, it had often frozen in transit, burst its bottles, and all that remained were chunks of red ice.

Defensive positions which offered shelter to their occupants were almost non-existent. This resulted in a tactical development whereby both sides fought bitterly for possession of the scattered villages where there was at least some cover to be found against the cruel cold. A further result was that both sides shelled these villages and set fire to the wood and thatch houses in order to deprive the enemy of the relief which they provided. There could be no question of digging in; the ground was frozen to the consistency of iron.

Weapons, too, were affected. The lubricant fluid of the artillery pieces froze, the mechanism of the machine guns froze. It was frequently impossible to open the breech. There was no glycerine, nor fuel designed for use in the extreme cold. At night it was often necessary to keep small fires burning underneath our tanks, lest the engines freeze and burst. The tanks frequently slipped on the icy ground and slid over inclines.

Perhaps this brief description will give the reader some indication of the conditions under which the German army lived and fought in Russia during the winter of 1941-42.

The Russians, by contrast, were far better off. For one thing, the extreme cold was no novelty to them; they were accustomed to it. Furthermore, Moscow lay immediately behind them, so that the lines of supply to the Russian front were short. Many Russian units were issued with padded fur jackets, padded boots, and fur caps with large earpieces. They had felt boots. They lacked neither gloves nor warm underclothes. Their goods trains were drawn by Siberian engines, specially built to withstand extreme temperatures. The Russian lorries and tanks were of course inconvenienced in the same way as our own, though not to the same extent. They again were designed to stand up to the climate.

We still saw little of the Red Air Force, though the front was now only a few minutes' flying time from the Moscow airfields.

Such were the conditions when, on December 6th, Marshal Zhukov launched his fateful and massive counter-offensive on the Moscow front.

### *The Russian Counter-Offensive*

The violent actions which almost led to the destruction of large parts of the German front form a chronological series of battles.



A whole book would be needed to describe them in detail. However, in order to understand the Battle of Moscow as a whole, they must at least be pictured in broad outline. The Battle of Moscow may be said to have gone on until mid-April 1942.

In the opening moves of the Russian counter-offensive, greatly superior Russian forces attacked north of Moscow, crossing the Moskau-Volga canal from the east in the direction of Klin and striking the left flank of General Reinhardt's Third Panzer Group in the area south of the Volga lakes. At the same time they attacked the front of Fourth Panzer Group, farther to the south, a particularly powerful thrust being directed westwards from Moscow along the line of the Moscow-Smolensk highway: this thrust hit the junction of Fourth Panzer Group with Fourth Army. The German panzer forces could not, in their weakened condition, withstand such tremendous pressure and were forced to withdraw slowly, fighting hard in snow and ice, with the purpose of recreating a unified front farther to the west. This withdrawal necessitated the abandonment of much heavy equipment. The occasional roads and tracks were deep in drifting snow and many guns and tanks became immobilized. Our casualties due to enemy action were heavy, but heavier yet were those caused by frostbite. This affected in particular the men's feet, for the unsuitable boots with which they were issued were too tight to permit the wearing of more than one pair of socks. Eventually even Hitler had to agree to the withdrawal of the two panzer groups. In mid-December the Russian offensive was extended southwards and new attacks were launched against Fourth Army between Serpukhov and Djutkovo. Here the enemy succeeded for the time being only in achieving local penetrations and Fourth Army managed in general to maintain its front intact.

The real danger spot was south of Fourth Army. There Guderian's Second Panzer Army (formerly Second Panzer Group) with only very weak armoured forces still at its disposal was being attacked by the enemy in overwhelming strength. He began a powerful advance on Tula, which Second Panzer Army was in no state to resist. Having obtained this first objective, one part of the Russian force here engaged continued to attack westwards, while the remainder turned north-west towards Kaluga. Another attack was launched on the Oka sector in the Tarusa-Aleksin area: here again, part of the Russian force drove on westwards, while part turned north-west, in this case toward Maloyaroslavets and Medin.

Russian intentions were obvious. They were planning a wide



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double encirclement of Kluge's Fourth Army, by means of attacks both in the north and south, with the ultimate aim of surrounding and destroying that army in its present positions west of Moscow. The German commanders could scarcely hope to hinder, let alone defeat, the great southern pincer. A gap now existed between Fourth Army and Second Panzer Army which the Russians were steadily widening, nor did Field-Marshal von Kluge possess any reserves with which to restore the increasingly dangerous situation on his southern flank. Furthermore, Fourth Army possessed only one supply route to the rear, the great Yukhnov-Medin-Maloyaroslavets-Podolsk road. Every other road in the entire army area had disappeared beneath the drifting snow. If the Russians, advancing from the south, should succeed in cutting our unique supply line, then it was all up with Fourth Army.

*'Fourth Army will Stand and Fight!'*

In view of the situation, it is not surprising that Army Group Centre should have considered ordering a planned withdrawal of the whole reinforced Fourth Army westwards. This was all the more logical since Second Panzer Army to the south had been compelled to retreat behind the Oka on both sides of Velev. A line was therefore designated on the map, running roughly from Velev through Yukhnov on the Ugra to Gzhatsk and then north, into which Fourth Army was to withdraw. Orders to reconnoitre this line had been issued. One motorized division was already on the march to Yukhnov. Field-Marshal von Kluge and his staff were still, deliberately, in Maloyaroslavets, though that town was now seriously threatened. In mid-December he summoned his corps commanders and their chiefs of staff to a conference in the wooden cottage which was his headquarters for the purpose of discussing in detail the withdrawal of those units of Fourth Army located south of the Moscow-Smolensk highway. All seemed perfectly clear.

Then a telephone call came through from General von Greiffenberg, the Chief of Staff of Army Group Centre; he wished to speak to the Chief of Staff, Fourth Army. I went to the telephone: Greiffenberg was a close personal friend of mine. He now said:

'You'd better make yourself comfortable where you are. A new order has just arrived from Hitler. Fourth Army is not to retreat a single yard.'



The reader who has followed the story so far will understand the effect that this order produced upon us. According to every calculation, it could only mean the destruction of the Fourth Army. Yet this order was obeyed. Units already moving westwards were turned about and brought back to the front. Fourth Army prepared to fight its final battles. Only a miracle could save it now.

Nor was that all. At this critical moment a drastic re-shuffle of the commanding generals took place.

### *Changes in Command*

The Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Centre, Field-Marshal von Bock, had long suffered from occasional severe stomach pains. His physical condition had deteriorated as a result of the defeat of his army group outside Moscow. Now he had to give up his command, at least temporarily. He was replaced by Field-Marshal von Kluge, that man of iron, who left Fourth Army on December 18th and took over the Army Group, the headquarters of which was then located in the forest west of Smolensk.

Thus in its moment of supreme peril Fourth Army found itself without a commander. Field-Marshal von Kluge believed that he could still exercise direct personal control over his old army by telephone and wireless from Smolensk. He therefore sent me, as his former chief of staff, orders and instructions which I then had to carry out entirely on my own responsibility. This state of affairs went on until December 26th, when the new army commander, General of Mountain Troops Kübler, arrived at Fourth Army headquarters. For a time the army had been temporarily under command of General of Panzer Troops Stumme. It is easy to see what an additional burden this confused and confusing command organization had imposed upon the army.

But even more significant changes were taking place at a higher level. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch, had long ago ceased to see eye to eye with Hitler. Also for years he had suffered from a bad heart. The situation west of Moscow was too much for him. He was retired from the service and Hitler took over the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Army, assigning the full powers of that most important position to himself alone. His only adviser, with any authority, to retain his office was the Chief of the General Staff, General Halder.

Hitler believed that he personally could ward off the catastrophe



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which was impending before Moscow. And it must be stated quite frankly that he did in fact succeed in doing so.

His fanatical order that the troops must hold fast regardless in every position and in the most impossible circumstances was undoubtedly correct. Hitler realized instinctively that any retreat across the snow and ice must, within a few days, lead to the dissolution of the front and that if this happened the *Wehrmacht* would suffer the same fate that had befallen the *Grande Armée*. In the circumstances then prevailing the divisions could not have been withdrawn more than three to six miles a night. More could not be asked of the troops or of the horses in their present exhausted condition. The withdrawal could only be carried out across the open country, since the roads and tracks were blocked with snow. After a few nights this would prove too much for the troops, who would simply lie down and die wherever they found themselves. There were no prepared positions in the rear into which they could be withdrawn, nor any sort of a line to which they could hold on.

So during the weeks which followed the battle moved slowly westwards. Our armies, fighting fiercely, were forced back step by step. The Russians repeatedly broke through our front, but it was always just possible to throw them out again. The combat strength of the companies was now frequently reduced to forty men. Our losses in weapons and equipment were heavy. Until the end of December the principal danger remained the threat to Fourth Army's southern flank.

And now fortune smiled on Hitler. Though the enemy was far stronger than were we, his offensive operations began to slow down. He was doubtless disappointed that he had not yet succeeded in destroying the German front west of Moscow and was astonished by the steadfastness of the decimated German divisions fighting without any protection against the bitter weather. The Russian command began to drive its troops forward ruthlessly. In Maloyaroslavets, a few days before Christmas, we intercepted the following wireless messages which are not without interest. A Russian regimental commander signalled back: 'Temporarily impossible to carry out attack as ordered. Twelve-hour postponement necessary.' The reply from his senior officer was: 'You will attack at once. If not, I'm afraid your health will suffer.'

Something in the nature of a miracle occurred on the southern flank of Fourth Army. Inexplicably enough the Russians, despite the local supremacy they here possessed, failed to occupy the



Yukhnov-Maloyaroslavets road and thus cut Fourth Army's sole supply route. Night after night Below's Cavalry Corps, which was causing us great anxiety during the second half of December, pushed on deep in our rear towards Yukhnov. Indeed it actually reached the vital road, but remarkably enough failed to close it. The Cavalry Corps continued to advance westwards and disappeared into the great Bogoroditskoie Marshes.

On Christmas Day 1941, the staff of Fourth Army was still in Maloyaroslavets. On Christmas Eve there had been fighting all through the night very close to our headquarters. The 19th Panzer Division, which had been pulled out of the front, was all that now lay between us and the Russians, and the division had only fifty serviceable tanks left.

During these weeks the Luftwaffe could no longer be as effective as before. Strong elements of Kesselring's Second Air Fleet had had to be transferred to North Africa in November; Field-Marshal Rommel was in trouble down there.

On December 25th the headquarters of Fourth Army was transferred at the last possible moment to Yukhnov.

By December 22nd both the Fourth and the Third Panzer Groups had become separated from Fourth Army. Fourth Army was now entirely on its own, nor could it exercise command powers over the two Panzer Groups north of the Moscow-Smolensk highway.

A comparison of strengths, as they existed at the end of December, is instructive. Fourth Army, between Kaluga and Djutkovo consisted at this time of thirteen infantry divisions and one panzer division. These formations, however, were much reduced in strength and many of the divisions were in fact only battle groups of all arms. Facing the front of Fourth Army, with most of their strength in the southern sector, were the following Russian units: 24 rifle divisions, 6 rifle brigades, 3 armoured brigades and 2 air landing brigades. Advancing westwards, south of Kaluga, were a further 6 rifle divisions, 1 armoured brigade and 4 cavalry divisions. Assembling in the Tula area were 3 rifle divisions, 1 motorized division, 2 armoured divisions and 2 armoured brigades.

These figures speak for themselves. Needless to say, not all the Russian divisions were up to war establishment, and some were very weak indeed. Their organization was variable and there were great differences between them in combat value. The Russian talent for improvisation was clearly apparent. For example the cavalry divisions were often accompanied by infantry on sledges, these being



pulled by means of a rope attached to the cavalryman's saddle. It was a strange sight when, on a bright moonlit night, long unbroken lines of horsemen advanced across the snow, each with his infantryman on a sledge behind him.

Our losses in equipment equalled if they did not surpass our losses in men. An example of this is the state of the Fourth Army's army artillery early in January of 1942. This is the artillery which was not part of the divisions or corps but was directly subordinate to the army commander. Its original strength had been as follows: 48 heavy howitzers, 36 mortars, 48 100 mm. guns, 9 150 mm. guns, together with 84 assault guns and 252 heavy and light tractors. It had now been reduced to the following: 5 heavy howitzers, 8 mortars, 17 100 mm. guns, 2 150 mm. guns, 12 serviceable assault guns and 22 tractors.

### *The Battle of Early 1942*

Despite this great superiority in strength, the Russians had not succeeded in destroying the German front west of Moscow by the end of 1941. This, however, by no means meant that the acute crisis had been passed. Throughout the first three months of 1942 Fourth Army repeatedly found itself in circumstances of the greatest peril.

In January the thermometer sank to its lowest point, 42 degrees of frost Centigrade. This only lasted for a few days, after which the temperature fluctuated. In a chapter of this length it is not possible to describe in detail the battles which now took place, though they form part of the greater Battle of Moscow. These were terrible months. Hitler later ordered that a medal be struck, the Eastern Medal, for distribution to all those who had taken part in the heavy fighting on the Eastern Front during the winter of 1941-42. To possess this medal was, and is, regarded as a very special distinction.

On December 26th General of Mountain Troops Kübler, a tough soldier, had taken over command of Fourth Army. Within a few weeks he realized that he was incapable of mastering the situation. During the second half of January he was replaced by General Heinrici, who was to command Fourth Army successfully for a long time.

### *Conclusion*

The campaign in Russia, and particularly the turning-point before Moscow, marked the first great German reversal, both in the politi-



cal and in the military fields. In the West, that is to say in our rear, there was no longer any hope of the desired peace with England, and in North Africa too we had suffered a severe set-back. There were German fronts along the coasts of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France. The situation in the Mediterranean was grave. German troops were deployed in the Balkans and in Greece. One glance at a map of the world will reveal that the small area in Central Europe marked GERMANY was quite incapable of generating sufficient power thus to embrace the whole European continent. Step by step Hitler's policy had led the German people and armed forces alike ever deeper into the realms of fantasy.

One recalls the last years of Alexander the Great, marching on and on with his little army into Asia until at least the situation became impossible and his ambitions collapsed about him. Or Charles XII, that Swedish King who, in 1709, penetrated central Russia as far as Poltava, where his small force was in due course destroyed by the Muscovites. Army Group South had passed by Poltava during this summer of 1941.

But the closest parallel is that provided by the Emperor Napoleon, the child of the French Revolution who had believed that he could conquer all Europe. It was in Russia, among the flames of burning Moscow, that he met his nemesis. We shall return to this parallel directly.

Meanwhile it is often asked whether the Germans would have been victorious if they had succeeded in capturing Moscow. This remains a purely academic question, for no man can answer it with any degree of certainty. My personal opinion is that even if we had managed to take Moscow the war would have been far from won. Russia is so vast and the Russian government was so determined, that the war would simply have gone on, taking new forms, in the huge spaces of that country. The best we could have expected was partisan warfare on an enormous scale in European Russia, quite apart from the great expanse of Asia which is also Russian territory.

One fact is beyond dispute: the German military leaders and above all the German troops achieved what was wellnigh impossible, and these achievements were to be surpassed in the years to come. The war in the East was the final testing ground of our soldiers: in two world wars they showed that they possessed the steely toughness necessary to face conditions there.



## 1812 and 1941

To end this chapter the reader may be interested in a comparison between Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812 and Hitler's of 1941, though from the point of view of the historian, historical comparisons do not of course exist, since the causes and circumstances of apparently similar events are always quite different. Nevertheless, it is interesting to view the two campaigns, as it were, side by side.

Napoleon was no true Frenchman, but an Italian from Corsica, an island which had become a part of France. Hitler was no true German, but a German-Austrian. Napoleon exploited the power generated by the French Revolution and relied on the strength of France. Hitler made use of Germany's strength. Napoleon, that child of revolution, had fought a long series of wars and had conquered the countries of Europe one after the other. Hitler followed in his footsteps. Napoleon's primary target was England and he was prepared to launch an invasion from Boulogne; Hitler's 1940 Operation *Sealion*, on the other hand, was never more than a threat designed to achieve political ends. The English fleet defeated the French and thus destroyed Napoleon's dream of conquering England by force. He therefore decided to damage the island kingdom by means of his continental blockade. Most of the countries of Europe were compelled to carry out the measures he now ordered, and only Russia hesitated to do so. That was one of the main reasons for Napoleon's decision to make war on Russia. Hitler began his war with the intention of winning land in Russia, destroying Bolshevism and becoming the master of Europe.

Both Napoleon and Hitler believed that their wars in Russia would be brought to as swift and victorious a conclusion as the other wars which they had won. Both had formed quite erroneous pictures of the inner strength and of the magnitude of Russia. Both went to war insufficiently prepared and both discounted the difficulties of supplying their armies in that huge, impoverished land. Many of Napoleon's marshals and generals disapproved of his plan for the 1812 campaign: so too did many of Hitler's.

Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812 with an army of over 600,000 men (more than 200,000 of whom, incidentally, were German, Flemish, Polish, Swiss, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese conscripts), 1,400 guns and 180,000 horses. Napoleon led a European army. Hitler attempted to do the same. Though he failed, he could count



among his soldiers Rumanians, Hungarians, Italians, Slovaks, Finns, a Spanish division and a legion of French volunteers. On June 21st, 1812, Napoleon issued his notoriously bombastic order to his troops. Before the opening of the 1941 campaign, Hitler issued a similar order. On the evening of June 22nd, 1812, the Emperor watched his soldiers cross the Niemen at Kovno. Hitler's armies crossed the Bug on this same date, one hundred and twenty-nine years later. Napoleon opened hostilities on June 24th. In both cases the date for the beginning of a campaign in the East was notably late.

In 1812, as in 1941, there was an unintended pause in the operations. The Tsar succeeded in ensnaring Napoleon in political discussions, so that valuable weeks were lost to the French Emperor. However, at a relatively late season, Napoleon resumed his advance on Moscow, as Hitler did on October 2nd, 1941. In 1812 the Russians carried out a fiercely fought withdrawal, thus luring Napoleon ever deeper into Russia and the Russian winter. In 1812 the French Emperor succeeded in capturing Moscow, but that was not the end of the war. On the contrary, it was only now that the war, so far as the Russians were concerned, really began. Hitler failed to take Moscow, but in this campaign again it was only now that the enemy really began to fight. When, far too late, the Emperor was compelled to leave burning Moscow, he had suffered his first great defeat. The situation was similar in 1941. In both cases the Russians now launched their great counter-offensive, and in both wars the partisans played a great part.

In 1812 Napoleon believed that he could save his army by withdrawing it across the ice and snow: instead, the retreat destroyed the Grand Army. Hitler, in December of 1941, ordered that there was to be no retreat whatever: with a gigantic effort the front was held and the crisis eventually overcome. Further parallels can be found, but as we have noted, historic comparisons must be treated with caution.

1812 and 1941 proved that with old-fashioned means of transportation, that is to say with horses and marching men, it is not possible to conquer areas of the dimensions that exist in Russia within a limited time. Neither Napoleon's strong force of cavalry, nor Hitler's motorized formations were numerically sufficient to seize and maintain control of the countryside.

Before launching his attack Napoleon made one last attempt to persuade the Tsar to give in. He sent the Comte de Narbonne to



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see Tsar Alexander at Vilna. The Tsar spoke to the ambassador as follows: 'I have no illusions. I am aware that your Emperor is a great general, but I have two allies—space and time. In all this huge country there is no corner so obscure that I shall not withdraw into it, no position so remote that I shall not defend it before I am prepared to sign a dishonourable peace. It is not I who will attack, but I shall not lay down my arms so long as a single foreign soldier remains on Russian soil.'

This determination on the part of the Tsar in 1812 applied equally to Stalin in 1941. The great difference between the two wars is that the soldier-emperor led his army to Moscow and back in person. This Hitler did not do.

At a Russian council of war, held in 1812, it was debated whether or not to evacuate Moscow. Prince Kutusov rose to his feet and said: 'The loss of Moscow does not mean that Russia is lost. I regard it as my duty to save my army from destruction, to safeguard its means of life and to ensure the inevitable destruction of the enemy even if this entails the evacuation of Moscow. It is therefore my intention to retire through Moscow along the Riasan road. I am aware that I shall have to pay the price for everything I do, but I am prepared to sacrifice myself for the sake of my country. I order a withdrawal.'

It may be regarded as certain that in similar circumstances, if the Germans had been able to take Moscow, the Soviets would have acted in the same fashion.

It is interesting to learn that on October 21st, 1812, Marshal Mortier received an order from Napoleon telling him to blow up the Kremlin before marching out of Moscow. Hitler had the same intention, in the event of Moscow being captured.

The great supply difficulties of 1812 and of 1941 have already been described. In 1941 the chief problem was that of keeping the troops supplied with ammunition and the motorized formations with fuel. In 1812 the great problem had been to find fodder for the horses. It can be assumed that Napoleon's 180,000 beasts were certainly incapable of surviving on the sort of nourishment to which the Cossack ponies were accustomed. The Emperor's cavalry suffered greatly in the battles and marches of his campaign, and the casualties among his horses mounted steadily.

After the Battle of Borodino the great cavalry leader, Murat, upbraided his generals. He said that the cavalry attacks had not been pushed home with sufficient vigour. To which the cavalry



commander. General Nansouty, replied: "It's the fault of the horses. They're not patriotic enough. Our soldiers fight well, even without bread, but the horses won't go along without their hay."

There is a famous picture of Napoleon, mounted on his charger, sunk in thought as he rides eastwards at the head of a column of his Imperial Guards along a sandy Russian road. This picture is entitled: "They grumbled, but they followed him loyally." That is the best description of 1812 and of 1941 alike. For there can be no doubt that the German troops, too, did their utmost.

# THE STRUGGLE APPROACHES ITS CLIMAX

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

WHILE Germans and Russians were locked in a life and death struggle on the snow-covered plains of Eastern Europe, the Pacific Ocean was suddenly turned into a theatre of war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, which took place on December 8th, 1941. Now the whole world was indeed in flames. The German Government utilized the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the Anglo-Saxon powers to declare war, three days later, upon the United States of America. This decision was based on a gross under-estimate of the vast American war potential, and every sensible person in Germany was flabbergasted by Hitler's action. The immediate result, which very soon became apparent, was that American supplies to the Soviet Union now assumed the dimensions of a veritable flood. It is beyond question that these supplies contributed decisively to the success of the Red colossus in overcoming the tremendous losses suffered and in growing steadily stronger as the war went on. Reliable figures for the delivery of American supplies to the Soviet Union reveal the following items: 17,000 aeroplanes, 51,000 jeeps, 400,000 lorries, 12,000 armoured fighting vehicles, 8,000 anti-aircraft guns, 105 submarines, 197 torpedo boats, 50,000 tons of leather, 15,000,000 pairs of boots, 3,700,000 tyres, 2,800,000 tons of steel, 800,000 tons of chemicals, 340,000 tons of explosives, 2,600,000 tons of oil products, 4,700,000 tons of food and 81,000 tons of rubber. It is no exaggeration to say that, without this massive American support, Russia would scarcely have been in a position to take the offensive in 1943.

In Africa, too, the situation was critical at the end of 1941. Rommel had not succeeded in capturing Tobruk during the previous spring, for the British had decided quite correctly not to evacuate it when they were forced back to the Egyptian frontier. Two attempts to capture the fortress by surprise attacks had failed, and Rommel lacked the strength to mount a planned assault. Rommel was now feverishly busy, attempting to resume the offensive just as soon as adequate reinforcements should have reached him. The trans-Mediterranean convoys, which had originally crossed that sea without trouble, were now subject to ever-increasing attacks by British naval and air forces. Rommel had, in



consequence, to postpone his attack from September to October, then to November and finally to December. The result was what Rommel had long feared: the enemy got his blow in first. On November 18th General Auchinleck launched the attack of his Eighth Army, which was far stronger than the Axis forces facing him. After a fluctuating battle which lasted for several weeks, he succeeded in breaking through the Italian forces encircling Tobruk and relieved the valiant garrison. Rommel was compelled to retreat and by the beginning of the new year his forces were located in the great Sirte bend, between Agedabia and Tripoli, which was almost exactly where they had been when he assumed command just one year earlier. But he recognized and seized the opportunity provided by the dispersal of the enemy army and by the logistical problems which the British had not yet solved. The Eighth Army's position was, in fact, weak and Rommel exploited this weakness at once. He counter-attacked on January 21st and by ruthlessly committing everything to the battle he succeeded early in February in once again advancing to the gates of Tobruk.

On the Eastern Front, during the early months of 1942 when the Soviet offensive had at last been halted, the German Army faced the task of clearing up the many enemy salients which had been driven through our lines and in breaking the numerous Russian encirclements which had cut off smaller or larger bodies of our troops. The most important of these operations were directed against the encirclements of Cholm and Demensk, the deep salient towards Isyum, south of Kharkov, and the Russian beachhead at Feodosia in the Crimea. Measures could also now be taken to sort out the formations which had become hopelessly entangled during the winter battle, to rest them, and to form new divisions in Germany. The Waffen-SS was expanded still further, which was to the disadvantage of the Army whose battle-tried divisions were thus deprived of many irreplaceable junior officers and senior non-commissioned officers. By the end of the war the Waffen-SS was to consist of thirty-eight divisions.

When, in the course of 1942, it became important to draw on the swollen ground staffs of the Luftwaffe in the interests of the Army, Hitler ordered that the redundant Air Force personnel should not be simply transferred to the Army divisions, for he feared that the well-indoctrinated men of the Luftwaffe would suffer 'ideologically' from such incorporation. Instead he accepted Goering's suggestion that sixteen 'Luftwaffe field divisions' be formed. One result of this was that the Army divisions, starved of replacements, were gradually ground down, while the new Luftwaffe Field Divisions, owing to their lack



## COMMENTARY

of combat experience, suffered disproportionately high casualties as soon as they went into action.

In the matter of future operational strategy Hitler and the Army High Command were, as usual, at loggerheads. Hitler had made the former Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal von Brauchitsch, the scapegoat for the reverses of the previous year, had dismissed him, and had himself assumed the functions and office of Commander-in-Chief of the Army. He now chose as the objective of our operations the Don-Volga area and the Caucasus with its mineral wealth. The Chief of the General Staff, General Halder, had other views. He believed that Moscow, being the Russian capital and the hub of the Russian communications network, remained the most important target and must now be finally captured. He pointed out, with the most solemn emphasis, the danger of creating an uncovered flank three hundred miles long, which was bound to come about should the Army advance to the Don-Volga area and the Caucasus. His arguments failed to convince Hitler.

On May 12th the Soviet Marshal Timoshenko attacked the German positions in the Kharkov area, and was not easily defeated. At the same time Manstein's Army opened its attack on Kerch. This might be described as the overture to the big attack on Sebastopol which was launched on June 1st. After a month's fighting the brave and stubborn resistance of the garrison was overcome and Sebastopol was captured. On the same day Hitler's great summer offensive began. The old sector of Army Group South had been divided in two, the new commands being Army Group A on the right and Army Group B on the left. Army Group B was now ordered to capture Stalingrad and then send mobile formations down the Volga to Astrakhan. Meanwhile Army Group A was to recapture Rostov, which had been lost during the winter, and to push on into the Caucasus. Once again, as in the previous year, the objectives were divergent. The blow was struck, not with a clenched fist, but with an open hand and fingers extended. Stalin's Chief of Staff, Marshal Shaposhnikov, is reported to have said at the time that he hoped Hitler would go for Stalingrad, since this would be the quickest way to ultimate Russian victory.

The German advance was rapid, and the Donetz basin was soon taken. But the small number of prisoners captured and the limited quantity of supplies which fell into our hands were both surprising and significant: they were clear proof that the Soviets were avoiding a decisive engagement. Only at the Battle of Kalach, in the great Don bend, were large enemy forces destroyed. Rostov was recaptured, the Caucasus reached on a front more than sixty miles wide, and on



August 8th German forces occupied Maikop in the oilfields. This was the high-water mark of the German advance in the East. Some fifty millions of Russians lived in the territories now occupied, which contained more than half the Russian resources in coal, aluminium, manganese, and iron ore and through which ran 40 per cent of Russia's railways. Meanwhile on the central sector of the front it was necessary to beat off heavy Russian counter-attacks designed to relieve the pressure on their armies farther to the south. These defensive battles caused us unnecessarily heavy casualties owing to Hitler's obstinacy in refusing to sanction even local withdrawals.

On August 25th German mountain troops succeeded in planting the swastika flag on the top of the Elbrus, the highest peak in the Caucasus. But then the German advance was slowed down, owing to a shortage of fuel and also to stronger Russian counter-attacks which now developed along the Terek. The attack on Stalingrad, which had begun on August 14th, also made only slow progress, and it was not until September 1st that the German forces, fighting against bitter resistance, penetrated into the city's outer suburbs.

During the course of this summer the German troops holding the Atlantic coast were roused from the deceptive calm which prevailed there when Canadian forces landed at Dieppe under the command of Admiral Mountbatten, an officer destined to achieve fame later in the war. It is true that they were beaten off, with heavy casualties to the attacking troops, but, as was intended, the landing gave the enemy valuable experience which was to be of use to him in the great invasion of 1944.

In Africa there had been an improvement, which was only temporary, in Rommel's supply position, and this enabled him to contemplate a renewed attack on Tobruk. The plans of the German and Italian Supreme Commands envisaged first the capture of Tobruk and then an assault on Malta. The seizure of the island would finally eliminate the base from which the British carried out their naval and air attacks on the Axis convoys, and which cost us so dear.

On May 26th Rommel attacked, with three German and the same number of Italian armoured or motorized divisions. His plan was to envelop the enemy's army from the south, and by the afternoon of the next day he was already behind the British Gazala position. Now, however, he began to be in trouble. The battle lasted for three weeks and it was solely due to his repeated, energetic, personal control of the troops that at length his Army managed to overcome the enemy's strongpoints one by one and thus regain its freedom. The toughest



resistance of all was that offered by the desert fort of Bir Hakeim, manned by French troops and by a Jewish battalion: it was not captured until June 9th. On June 20th Rommel began his attack on the fortress of Tobruk, an operation in which he was given magnificent support by the bombers and dive-bombers of Kesselring's air fleet. He managed to achieve a measure of surprise, for on the previous day he had deceived the enemy into believing that he planned to by-pass the fortress, as he had done in 1941, and pursue the weakening British main forces into Egypt. On the very first day he broke through the defensive system around the fortress and by evening the exhausted German troops were at last in possession of the objective which had cost both defenders and attackers so many lives. The quantity of supplies captured was wellnigh incalculable and thirty thousand prisoners were taken.

The capture of Tobruk undoubtedly was the high-water mark of the German campaign in the desert. Following hard on the heels of the retreating enemy, Rommel crossed the Egyptian frontier and on June 30th he faced the strong British defensive position at El Alamein, the last tenable line covering the approaches to Alexandria and the Nile Delta. With this advance Rommel had reached the end of his resources, particularly since the logistical situation had deteriorated once again and supplies were only reaching his Army in a very thin trickle indeed. The plan to capture Malta had to be abandoned, since the German Air Force was not able to carry out this operation and simultaneously to support the further advance by Rommel's Panzer Army. This decision was all the more regrettable since we now know that at this time the island was so short of supplies that it was almost ready to surrender.

For Rommel the summer months in front of El Alamein were one long series of crises. On August 30th an attempt to break through the British position and advance on Alexandria nearly succeeded. The principal cause of its failure was the sinking of Axis tankers which had almost reached the Tobruk roadsteads. As a result fuel was in such short supply that for six days Rommel's attacking forces were immobilized in the desert. The troops called this failed operation, which cost them such heavy loss of life, 'the six-day bicycle race.'

The Panzer Army Africa never recovered from this blood-letting while its supply situation grew steadily more precarious. Only rarely did a convoy reach the North African harbours intact, and as a result of the mounting toll of losses, merchant shipping tonnage available to the Axis powers began to decline steeply. Rommel was fully conscious of the gravity of his words when, in mid-September of 1942, he informed the Armed Forces Supreme Command: 'Unless the supplies to Africa



are placed on a firm basis, the Panzer Army will not be able to withstand for any length of time the combined forces of two world powers. Sooner or later it will be in danger of suffering the same fate which befell the Halfaya garrison.' (This had had to capitulate early in 1942 owing to the exhaustion of its supplies.)

Looking at the picture as a whole, it appears that in the autumn of 1942 the German command had reached the zenith of its successes. In the west, German forces held the Atlantic coast from the North Cape to the Bay of Biscay, while Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg were occupied. In the east, German soldiers were in the outskirts of Leningrad and along the banks of the Don and the Volga, while all the Balkan peninsula was under German control. In the south, German and Italian troops were no more than thirty miles from the Nile. Germany's U-boats and auxiliary cruisers ranged the oceans of the world and constituted a greater menace to Allied shipping than ever before. The German Air Force was, it is true, no longer as strong as it had once been, but it was still capable of dealing the enemy some very hard blows.

Nevertheless, it was only now that it began to be plain to see how very tautly the bow was drawn. Rations in Germany were still ample, though meat and fats were in somewhat short supply: rations in the armed forces remained adequate right up to the end of the war. Bombing attacks on the German cities were growing heavier and were beginning to exact an awful toll. Supplies of essential raw materials were approaching the available maximum; nevertheless the armaments industry was producing at a very high rate. There were few men in first-class physical condition left who had not been mobilized as a result of the heavy casualties sustained during the previous winter in Russia: both the armed forces and industry competed for whatever man-power remained. This led to the compulsory importation of labour from the occupied territories, which in its turn created or strengthened the partisan movements in France and, even more so, in the Eastern Territories and the Balkans.

In general the German nation did not yet seriously consider the possibility of defeat, and girded itself for a war which must apparently be one of long duration. Although so many families had a casualty to mourn, the German people were prepared to fight on, since no alternative seemed to exist. In Italy, our most important ally, the frame of mind was quite different. The Italians had won no great victories, but rather had suffered a monotonous series of defeats: they had lost Italian East Africa, had watched vast numbers of their soldiers disappear into

British captivity, had seen strong units of their Navy sunk, and were suffering from increasing hunger.

Thus as 1942, the third year of the war, approached its end, the situation seemed in general to be a satisfactory one. But in the remaining months of that year two events were to take place in rapid succession which completely altered the picture, first in the south and then in the east. Both were decisive turning-points in the war. The first of these is described in detail in the next chapter.





PART THREE

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# El Alamein

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*Lieutenant-General*  
FRITZ BAYERLEIN



FRITZ BAYERLEIN was appointed Operations Officer of Panzer Group Guderian in France in June 1940, and in 1941 served in Russia as Operations Officer of Guderian's Panzer Group 2. In September 1941 he became Chief of Staff of the Africa Corps and from the summer of 1942 to early in 1943 was Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Rommel. He took command of the 3rd Panzer Division in 1943 and of Panzer Lehr Division in January of the following year. He was promoted Lieutenant-General in May 1944. He is now 66 years of age.





LIEUTENANT-GENERAL FRITZ BAYERLEIN

## *At the Gates of Egypt*

**A** STONY, waterless desert where bleak outcrops of dry rock alternated with stretches of sand sparsely clotted with camel-scrub beneath the pitiless African sun—such was the Alamein front in July of 1942. Lying between the rocky hillock of Tel el Eisa on the Mediterranean coast and the six-hundred-foot pyramid of Qaret el Hemeimat near the edge of the Qattara depression, it was the one position in the whole of the Western Desert which could not be outflanked. There lay what remained of Rommel's Army, exhausted by the heavy fighting for Tobruk and by the long pursuit, facing the defeated but still formidable troops of the British Empire. The infantrymen, unable to dig into the rocky soil, had built stone walls about their positions, which at least provided some protection against the enemy's fire.

'Our strength has faded away,' Rommel wrote in his diary on July 3rd, 1942. We had reached Alamein with thirteen operational tanks. The British defences consisted of four positions in depth, only one of which were we able to capture in the initial assault. Later we overran the next two. But despite desperate attacks, the main defensive position at Alamein, which covered the only springs of fresh water in this heart-rending countryside, remained in the hands of the British. The Battle of El Alamein may truly be said to have begun during these July days.

Our long-range reconnaissance planes informed us that the British fleet was leaving Alexandria with all speed, headed east. We later learned that the British had taken all the necessary steps for a defence of the Nile delta, as a precaution lest Rommel succeed in breaking down the last gate covering Egypt. Indeed plans had been made for a withdrawal to Palestine and, if need be, to Iraq, in the event of the Nile delta proving untenable.

## *The Initiative Passes—Auchinleck*

But General Auchinleck had no intention of letting the Alamein line go, as we soon discovered. Throughout the whole of July, the Eighth Army attacked our positions, with the purpose of regaining



the initiative and inflicting a defeat upon us. On July 10th the Australians captured the commanding height of Tel el Eisa, to the west of Alamein, and held it despite our heavy counter-attack. On July 14th New Zealand and Indian troops launched a night attack with the object of seizing ground of strategic importance on the Ruweisat Ridge. In another night attack on July 16th the Australians captured the steep ridge called El Makh Ahad in the south. Rommel counter-attacked the Ruweisat Ridge on the 18th and 19th: these counter-attacks failed. On the 21st the Australians pushed forward again in the north while in the centre the New Zealand Division, with strong supporting armour, attempted to tear our positions asunder. The break-through did not succeed. On July 26th the Ninth Australian Division launched yet another major attack north of Tel el Eisa. Our counter-measures succeeded in preventing a catastrophe.

### *Churchill in Cairo*

On July 30th General Auchinleck apparently realized that no further offensive operations were possible with the forces at his disposal. The Alamein front solidified.

In August Churchill arrived by air in Cairo, on his way to Moscow. Regrouping of British forces in the Western Desert soon showed that the nervous crisis engendered by the arrival of our tanks at the gateway to Egypt was now a thing of the past. A new Commander-in-Chief Middle East was appointed: this was General Sir Harold Alexander, the most skilful strategist and the best political brain at the disposal of the British Empire. General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery took over command of the Eighth Army, one of the most unconventional but also most talented of the British generals, an outstanding strategist who had a clear understanding of the nature and problems of mechanized warfare. Though often overbearing and incalculable in his dealings with superiors and subordinates alike, his strategic planning was markedly systematic. He invariably insisted on possessing a clear superiority in *matériel* before opening a battle. According to his own report, as given in his book *Alamein to the River Sangro*, he regarded as his primary and most urgent task the strengthening and deepening of the British defensive positions at Alamein. All previous orders and plans for a further withdrawal of the Eighth Army into the Middle East he scrapped at once. He made it perfectly clear that there



would be no question of surrendering the Alamein line. Should Rommel go over to the offensive again, his attack would be met on the spot. He issued orders to his divisions telling them that henceforth their subordinate units would fight only as units. The dispersal of forces which had led to disaster in the past was not to be repeated. Within the framework of this tactical reorganization, he laid down that in future tanks and artillery were only to be committed in mass formations: he knew that a general can never have sufficient troops at the decisive point and that numerical inferiority in man-power can only be compensated for by a crushing superiority in metal.

Having taken the necessary measures to ensure the defence, he next undertook a basic reorganization of his Army. He formed a new army corps which would be capable of exploiting the successful break-through which he expected would follow the initial battle of attrition.

From now on, owing to the total mobilization of British industry and the steadily increasing supplies from America, the material superiority of the Eighth Army over Rommel's forces began to assume massive proportions. Tanks, planes, guns of all calibres, lorries, fuel and ammunition were moving around the Cape of Good Hope to Port Said, Suez and Alexandria.

### *Malta or Crete—the Fatal Decision for Rommel's Army*

Meanwhile our flow of supplies from across the Mediterranean diminished to an average total of 6,000 tons a month or approximately one-fifth of our normal requirements. Three-quarters of the supply ships that set out were sunk by the Royal Air Force or by the Royal Navy. Any accumulation of stocks against the future, decisive battle was thus rendered impossible. The Royal Air Force was stronger both in planes and in combat ability than ever before. In contrast Kesselring's air striking force was steadily melting away. Replacements did not arrive; Hitler needed every plane he could lay his hands on for the Russian front. The German fighter force became numerically very weak. Captain Marseille, the victor of one hundred and fifty-eight fights and the king of the African skies, had been shot down and killed.

Malta regained its importance as a base from which to attack the convoys moving between Italy and North Africa, for the majority of the transports were routed from Sicily to Benghazi, the main



unloading port for the supplies of the German-Italian forces. This convoy route was within easy striking distance of Malta. The port capacity of Tobruk was quite inadequate. One result of this was that there were endless road convoys, from the ports to the Alamein position, which travelled under constant menace of attack by the Royal Air Force. These supply columns not only consumed costly fuel: the demands made upon the numerically inadequate vehicles were excessive. The distances by road to the front were some 330 miles from Tobruk, 600 miles from Benghazi, and from Tripoli, where many supplies were also unloaded, over 1,200 miles. The British supply lines, on the other hand, were some 55 miles from Alexandria and a little over 200 from Suez.

So long as Malta remained in British hands, the delivery of adequate supplies to our African front must be an impossibility unless Kesselring's Air Force was reinforced to several times its actual strength. But even now Hitler did not contemplate the elimination of the island fortress. Alamein, he maintained, could well be supplied via Crete, and Malta need only be 'kept quiet' by heavy bombing. It was the same story as Dunkirk in 1940. 'Dunkirk will be handed over to the Luftwaffe,' such had been the Führer's arrogant words at the time—and thus was the British Expeditionary Force saved. Any sensible strategic appreciation of the situation in August 1942 would inevitably have led to the realization that until the air and naval base at Malta ceased to act as a constant thorn in the flesh of our rearward communications, there was no possibility of the situation at the front improving and therefore no prospect of capturing the Nile delta and with it the centres of British strength in the Eastern Mediterranean. Rommel's Army was immobilized in the middle of the desert, far from its supply ports, while the enemy's air superiority made itself felt more and more from day to day. The actual possibilities of increasing our combat efficiency or even of resting our exhausted units remained in consequence very slight.

These considerations should have raised this question: despite the strength of the Alamein position, with its secure flanks, would it not have been wiser to carry out a long and opportune withdrawal? This would have presented the enemy with miles of useless desert and inflicted long supply lines upon him. In one of the defensive areas nearer to our supply bases, say in the Sollum area, it would then have been possible to rebuild the Army's offensive strength without interference by the enemy. Meanwhile the



amphibious assault on Malta could be carried out. This was Rommel's own opinion. But all such ideas of withdrawal were completely unacceptable to Hitler, whose gaze was riveted on the Suez Canal.

So nothing was done. Malta was not attacked, nor was Rommel's Army withdrawn. This was the fatal decision so far as the Alamein front was concerned. It was inevitable that Rommel's supply situation should become catastrophic. All prospects of capturing the Nile delta and the Suez Canal vanished in consequence. This put an end to the dream of an enormous pincer movement in which one German Army would move down from the Ukraine through the Caucasus while the other came north from the Western Desert across the Suez Canal, the objective being to capture the oilfields of the Middle East, followed by an attack upon the wide-open southern flank of the Soviet Union.

### *Now or Never—Alam el Halfa*

Nevertheless the imperturbable Hitler ordered that preparations be made to attack the Nile delta. The Italian High Command also entreated Rommel not to withdraw in any circumstances. Mussolini had himself arrived in Africa and was waiting impatiently in Derna for the day when he might take the salute at a parade of Axis tanks beneath the shadow of the pyramids.

Soon enough Rommel, too, resigned himself to the wishes of his two dictators. The troops originally intended for the assault on Malta were now sent to him as reinforcements. In the end Rommel made his decision to attack the British Alamein line and break through to the Suez Canal dependent only upon the arrival, by sea or air, of a few thousand tons of petrol. Rommel believed that now or never was the time to attempt an advance to the delta.

At a conference held on August 27th, the Field-Marshal Kesselring and Cavallero had guaranteed him six thousand tons of fuel, of which one thousand were to be flown in. Rommel said: 'The outcome of the battle will depend upon the delivery of this fuel at the proper time.' Cavallero replied: 'You can begin the battle, Field-Marshal, the fuel is already on its way.' During the night of August 31st Rommel attacked. Even then the British already had superiority in artillery, ammunition and tanks. The Royal Air Force had uncontested mastery of the skies. We were extremely short of tanks and ammunition. For that reason any attempt to break



through the strong British lines frontally was out of the question. Rommel chose the only possible course, that of a large envelopment. He launched feint attacks at the northern end of the line, a strong supporting attack in the centre, while the main thrust came in the south. His intention was to break through along the edge of the Qattara depression, where the British were weak, then to swing north, eastwards of Alam el Halfa, and go for the coast at El Hammam. By so doing he hoped to roll up the enemy positions. This was exactly the plan that he had followed at Gazala, three months before. Had it succeeded this time he would have encircled the Eighth Army and cut its communications.

But this was precisely the plan on which Generals Alexander and Montgomery were counting. Immediately after his arrival in the Western Desert, General Montgomery, as we later learned, had built strong defences on the important ridge of Alam el Halfa and had stationed a sizeable part of his tank strength in that area for defensive purposes. He had even arranged that a marked map should fall into our hands according to which the terrain to the south of Alam el Halfa was shown as good going for vehicles. In fact it was soft sand which caused our wheeled vehicles endless trouble.

On the morning of August 31st, when the attack was already five hours old, the British minefields were still not in our possession: this was quite contrary to all our expectations. But the Desert Fox had not lost his flair, his subtle sixth sense which had always stood him in such good stead. As soon as he realized that he had not succeeded in taking the enemy by surprise he wished to break off the attack. I was personally responsible for persuading Rommel that he let me continue to attack towards Alam el Halfa. (General Nehring, the commander of the Africa Corps, had been seriously wounded during the night and I was acting Corps Commander.) A sandstorm was rising, blowing clouds of dust into the faces of the British on Alam el Halfa. I wished to exploit this chance to capture the ridge.

However, the attack failed. The Desert Rats began to attack our flanks heavily. Bomber squadrons of the Royal Air Force, flying without opposition and in mass formations, dropped one bomb carpet after another, causing enormous casualties among our troops and producing a considerable effect upon their morale. The fuel promised by Cavallero did not arrive. Two of our most valuable tankers were sunk at sea, a third torpedoed just outside Tobruk. The air transports guaranteed by Kesselring also failed to show up.



So at last Rommel was compelled to break off his offensive. On September 3rd, much weakened by losses, particularly in armour, we began to retire.

### *Hitler's Promises*

We had scarcely reoccupied our original jumping-off positions, when a message arrived from Hitler, ordering Rommel to Germany on leave for the course of medical treatment which his doctors had long prescribed as necessary. General Stumme was transferred from the Eastern Front to act as deputy commander during the Field-Marshal's absence. A warning signal which Rommel sent to the Armed Forces Supreme Command shortly before leaving his Army, and in which he stressed once again the decisive importance of the logistical crisis, remained unheeded. Before going into a sanatorium in the Semmering mountains, Rommel also attended a conference with Hitler at the latter's headquarters in East Prussia which bore the code name of the 'Wolf's Lair.'

During the conference Rommel could not help noticing that the atmosphere at Supreme Headquarters was one of extraordinary optimism. Goering in particular tended to pooh-pooh the difficulties which confronted us in Africa. When Rommel drew his attention to the fact that enemy fighter-bombers had knocked out our tanks with 40 mm. shells, the Reich-Marshal reacted as though this were a personal affront. 'Quite impossible,' he said, 'nothing but latrine rumours. All the Americans can make are razor blades and Frigidaires.' Rommel replied: 'I only wish, Herr Reich-Marshal, that we were issued with similar razor blades.' Rommel had had the foresight to bring with him a British armour-piercing shell which had actually destroyed one of our tanks.

Hitler promised that the supply problem would be solved within the next few weeks by the employment, in vast numbers, of Siebel ferries, a type of craft immune to air and torpedo attacks. Statistics of current arms production were quoted which did indeed imply that within an appreciable time our supply difficulties would in fact be overcome. 'In the near future I'll be sending you in Africa a heavy-mortar brigade, five hundred barrels, as well as forty of the newest Tiger tanks, to be followed by several assault gun units.' Such were Hitler's promises. Later it transpired that they were all lies and deceit.

Rommel himself had to attend a conference of the 'world Press' in Berlin, in order to silence rumours concerning himself. Naturally



he was not able on this occasion to give the journalists any sort of factual statement about the current situation in Africa. But he hoped that by talking in optimistic terms he might be able to influence the British and thus bring them to postpone the date of their major offensive. Then he went to the mountains for his medical treatment.

He was worried about the difficult position of his Army and was unable to attain the necessary peace of mind which his cure required. The fragmentary information which reached him in his hotel was not cheerful. We had already lost the supply battle. The bombers of the Royal Air Force flew back and forth across our positions and supply lines both by day and by night. The first American Sherman tanks were arriving in the Nile delta. A massive artillery and an inexhaustible stock of ammunition had increased Montgomery's offensive strength. With each day that passed it became more and more apparent that, despite all our exertions, we could no longer hope to improve our supply position before Montgomery struck: it had been left too late.

### *On the Eve of the Decisive Battle*

The German-Italian Alamein position lay between the sea and the Qattara depression. There was no other defensive position in the Western Desert which could not be surprised and outflanked from the south. Only here must the attackers achieve a frontal break-through. This was an operation for which the British troops were particularly well suited, since their entire training was at this time still based upon the experiences of trench warfare as practised in the First World War. The excellent infantrymen from New Zealand and Australia would have every chance to show their mettle, while the overwhelmingly powerful and skilled British artillery, with its inexhaustible supplies of ammunition, could exercise an annihilating effect.

Rommel, on the other hand, had at all costs to prevent a break-through of our positions, since he was no longer capable of fighting a mobile defensive battle of the type in which he had shown himself to be a master during the winter of 1941-42. The shortage of fuel for our tanks and the crushing superiority of the Royal Air Force ruled out the possibility of winning such a battle. Therefore our positions had to be held, regardless of the cost. Any enemy breaches had to be cleaned up by immediate counter-attacks lest



they develop into a break-through. To fulfil these requirements, Rommel had strengthened his defensive fields by the sowing of countless mines and by building so-called 'Devil's Gardens.' The Italians were intermingled with their German comrades in the front line, to the extent that Italian battalions alternated with Germans. A German division, a German parachute brigade and five Italian infantry divisions held static defensive positions at the front. Mobile reserves were, in the northern sector, the 15th Panzer Division and the Italian *Littorio* Armoured Division, behind them the 90th Light and the Italian *Trieste* Division, and in the south, as army reserve, the 21st Panzer with the Italian *Ariete* Armoured Division.

### *The Failure of German Military Intelligence*

Incredible as it may seem, the intelligence service at Armed Forces Supreme Command was convinced that the British would be unable to attack in October. In mid-October, five days before Montgomery launched his offensive, an officer was sent from the general staff department 'Foreign Armies West' to Africa for the purpose of telling us this. What is more, Montgomery had succeeded in concealing from the German intelligence not only the date of his major offensive but also the direction that his main thrust would take. With superb co-ordination he had employed a mass of ingenious devices to dupe us into believing that his attack would come in the southern sector, meanwhile concealing his preparations for the principal attack in the north. Furthermore, he did his best to give us the impression that his preparations for the southern attack were not yet complete. In his jumping-off areas hundreds of tanks were concealed beneath dummy vehicles of all sorts. Dummy lorries were parked in gun positions. Then the guns were brought up by night and hidden beneath the dummies. In the rear areas tanks and guns which had been moved forward were in their turn replaced by dummies. In the southern sector large dummy supply depots were created; and this was done so slowly that we were forced to assume they would not be ready before November. In this southern sector a signals network was set up; its sole purpose was to mislead our signals intercept service. The impression that a pipe-line was being built was stimulated by the construction of refuelling points and fuel depots which were in fact nothing of the sort, and which were laid out with deliberate slowness. Particular care was taken that no vehicle should leave tell-



tale tracks in the sand. As a result of all these measures, deception of the German intelligence was so successful that the German High Command knew neither the date set for the attack nor its point of main effort, nor the assembly areas of the tanks. The British also succeeded in concealing from us two newly arrived divisions with a strength of 240 guns and 150 tanks.

Furthermore, it was Montgomery's intention to employ new offensive tactics for the first time in the coming battle. Hitherto the first objective in all modern battles had been the destruction of the enemy's armour as a preliminary to the comparatively simple task of overwhelming the enemy's soft-skinned forces. 'I decided to choose the other way,' Montgomery says in *Alamein to the River Sangro*, 'and first annihilate the Axis infantry which held the defence areas. I intended to break one stone after the other from the enemy wall and make carefully prepared isolated attacks, a task that was suited to the capabilities of my troops.'

It was Montgomery's plan to make his point of main effort in the northern sector of the front. Here the main attack would be carried out by General Sir Oliver Leese's 30th Corps, consisting of four infantry divisions, the 9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand and 1st South African. They were to clear two corridors in the German minefields. Through these corridors were to pass the 1st and 10th Armoured Divisions of General Lumsden's 10th Corps with the purpose of nipping our anticipated armoured counter-attacks in the bud. To the south General Sir Brian Horrocks' 13th Corps, with the 44th and 50th Infantry Divisions and the 7th 'Desert Rats' Armoured Division was to carry out two attacks. Their purpose was to mislead the Axis into believing that the main attack was coming in here. It was hoped that this would pin down the 21st Panzer Division and prevent its participation in the real main battle to the north.

Although Montgomery's Army contained only three armoured divisions, he also had at his disposal four independent armoured brigades. His total strength in armour consisted of more than a thousand tanks as against two German panzer divisions with a total of two hundred and seventy and two Italian armoured divisions with three hundred tanks; these Italian tanks were all obsolete and almost useless.



## *A Hopeless Battle—Rommel*

The night of October 23rd was still and clear. At 21.40 hours, in bright moonlight, Montgomery's artillery opened a barrage in the course of which a thousand heavy shells were put down on our batteries. The effect was devastating. The Alamein position became a hell of blast, smoke and dust. At 22.00 hours the target was switched to the advanced infantry positions and Rommel's 'Devil's Gardens.' The assault divisions of the 13th and 30th Corps came in to the attack. The Australians and the Highlanders cleared the northern lane through the minefields, moving westwards north of the Mitelriya Ridge. The New Zealanders and South Africans attacked the ridge from the north-east, captured it, and cleared the second lane through our minefields. Simultaneously the Indians carried out a large scale probing attack against our positions on the Ruweisat Ridge area, while far to the north the Australians launched a somewhat weaker attack between Tel el Eisa and the sea. Heavy fighting developed which lasted throughout the night. German and Italian resistance stiffened, but when dawn broke Montgomery's troops had in most cases captured their first objectives. The two corridors had been driven through the minefields and the heavy weapons were being brought forward. Behind the 30th Corps the 1st and 10th Armoured Divisions, with seven hundred tanks, began to move through the corridors. When the 10th Armoured reached the top of the Mitelriya Ridge, however, its further advance was prevented by artillery and anti-tank fire. The New Zealanders' armoured brigade moved westwards over the high ground but finally bogged down in large minefields covered by heavy defensive fire. The tanks were withdrawn behind the cover of the ridge and a long-range gunnery duel began. So the result of the operation was that the Eighth Army had succeeded in breaching the Axis positions and holding those breaches, but the tanks had failed to break through into the open terrain which lay to the west of our positions.

Meanwhile to the south the 7th Armoured and 44th Infantry Divisions had begun their attack and had captured two corridors through the eastern part of the minefields. Their attempt to go on through the western minefield had failed. The 13th Corps therefore changed its tactics and began to launch small attacks with limited objectives.

Rommel was at this time still in Germany. Hitler telephoned him at his sanatorium on the Semmering. This was towards noon on



the 24th of October. 'Rommel,' said Hitler, 'the news from Africa sounds bad. The situation seems somewhat obscure. Nobody appears to know what has happened to General Stumme. Do you feel capable of returning to Africa and taking command of the Army again?' Rommel, who had been under medical treatment for three weeks, was still a sick man and was certainly not fit enough to assume command in so severe a battle which already seemed hopelessly lost. Yet he did not hesitate for a moment. The next morning he flew off; he felt that his prospects of winning a victory were slight. He broke his journey in Rome in order briefly to discuss supply problems. Then he flew on to Crete and on the evening of the 25th he reached his battle headquarters in the Western Desert. General Ritter von Thoma, who in the meanwhile had been in temporary command of the Army, reported on the progress of the battle in the following terms:

'The position, Field-Marshal, has developed as was expected, that is to say unfavourably. The enemy's overwhelming artillery strength destroyed our minefields before his infantry even set foot in them. Now they're in his possession. The counter-attack of our 15th Panzer Division succeeded in halting the enemy but failed to throw him back. The unfortunate General Stumme was driving along an emergency track towards the centre of the battle in the early hours of October 24th, with the purpose of seeing for himself what was going on, when he suddenly found himself surrounded by British infantry with machine-guns and anti-tank weapons. Colonel Buechting, the only officer with him, was immediately killed by a bullet through the head. The driver turned the car about at once. General Stumme had jumped out, but now he managed to cling to the outside of the car while the driver, going flat out, succeeded in escaping from the enemy fire. At this point General Stumme must have fallen off. The driver noticed nothing. Later the general was found dead beside the track—heart attack.

'Unfortunately at the beginning of the British attack General Stumme forbade the destruction of the enemy's jumping-off positions because of our shortage of ammunition. As a result the British succeeded in capturing large parts of our minefields and defensive positions with only comparatively light casualties to themselves. The fuel situation permitted only limited movement and only local counter-attacks by our panzer units which were standing ready immediately behind the threatened sectors of the front. Elements of the 15th Panzer Division were sent in to counter-



attack yesterday and again several times today. They suffered heavy losses under the fearful artillery barrage and systematic bombing by the Royal Air Force. This evening only thirty-one of their tanks are still operational. Only small supplies of fuel remain available close to the front.'

Thus did von Thoma end his report. In Rome Rommel had already demanded that all available U-boats and destroyers of the Italian Navy be used at once for the transport of fuel and ammunition across the Mediterranean. Kesselring's Air Force was in no condition to deal with the Royal Air Force's bombing attacks. Rommel was determined, no matter what the circumstances might be, to throw the enemy out of our main defensive line and to occupy our old positions within the next few days. With this intention he assembled all his mobile forces which were scattered behind the northern sector of our front. However, he left the 21st Panzer Division in the south: this was to prove very disadvantageous to us.

During the night of October 25/26th the British again put down heavy artillery fire along the whole front: this soon became a single rolling barrage. Throughout the whole night the British attacked. Strong elements of our panzer divisions had already been committed in the foremost defensive line, since there was not enough infantry available. A steady stream of British night bombers unloaded their bombs on our troops. Shortly before midnight the enemy succeeded in capturing the important Point 28 (Kidney Ridge). He reinforced this position during that same night, so that he was able to continue his attack on the morning of the 26th and widen the bridgehead which he had won west of the minefields. An immediate counter-attack against this bridgehead was launched by the 15th Panzer and Littorio Divisions, supported by the concentrated fire of the army artillery and anti-aircraft guns. This counter-attack made only slow progress. The British defence was desperate. Every yard had to be fought for bitterly and there was much bloodshed. Nevertheless by the evening both the eastern and western flanks of Kidney Ridge had been re-occupied, though the summit itself remained in British hands. This was later to provide the jumping-off point for Montgomery's further decisive operations.

On the 26th of October Rommel watched the course of the attack at the northern end of the line. Over and over again formations of the Royal Air Force methodically bombed our troops. The British steadily strengthened their forces in the area of Kidney Ridge. Rommel ordered the artillery to bring down concentrations



of fire with the purpose of disrupting enemy movements. However, we were far too short of ammunition for our gunners to be able to carry this out with any prospect of success.

During the course of this day the 90th Light Division became drawn into the battle. It was supposed to attack Kidney Ridge. Apparently the English, who were constantly committing fresh units, wished to capture the area about Sidi Abd el Rahman. To frustrate this, Rommel moved the *Trieste* Division eastwards of El Daba. In the late afternoon German and Italian dive-bomber squadrons attempted to break up the British columns that were headed north-west: this was true self-sacrifice on the part of the German crews. Over fifty British fighters attacked the slow-flying planes and compelled the Italians in desperation to unload their bombs over our own troops, while the Germans forced their attack home, suffering very heavy losses in consequence. Never before in Africa had we seen so intense an anti-aircraft barrage as that which the British now put up. Hundreds of tracer shells shot across the sky in every direction, turning the heavens into a veritable hell.

The British made repeated attempts to break through our line south of Kidney Ridge by means of armoured attacks. Only when one hundred and fifty tanks were committed in the afternoon did they succeed in achieving a deep penetration. However, after heavy fighting the German and Italian tanks managed to force the British back. Throughout the day groups of twenty Royal Air Force bombers attacked at hourly intervals. These attacks not only caused the Axis troops considerable casualties, but also produced noteworthy symptoms of exhaustion and a depressing feeling of inferiority among our troops.

The supply situation was approaching catastrophe. The only tanker, the *Proserpina*, which could have brought a measure of relief to our fuel problems was bombed and sunk outside Tobruk. It was a matter of urgent necessity that our entire mobile forces be assembled in the north in order to throw back the British by means of a concentrated attack. But we had insufficient petrol for this. So we had no choice but to send in our tank units piecemeal, in isolated attacks, against the enemy's armoured columns. Since Montgomery was extraordinarily hesitant and operated with great caution, a concentration of all our armoured forces might well have led to a successful action on our part. Despite the bad fuel situation, Rommel therefore decided to transfer the whole of the 21st Panzer Division from the southern sector to the north. In so doing he was



well aware that in case of emergency the movement could not be reversed. However, he also withdrew half of the army artillery from the southern sector. 'We shall lose this battle unless the supply situation improves at once,' Rommel informed the 'Wolf's Lair' on this evening. And in view of all our past experience there could be no hope that this would happen.

### *Operation Supercharge—Montgomery*

The battle had now reached a critical phase for both sides. The British forces too were becoming tired. The violence of their attacks was diminishing. Their tanks losses due to Rommel's anti-tank defences were considerable, nor had they as yet succeeded in making the decisive break-through.

Montgomery now planned a new operation which was intended to secure the desired break-through in four days. He still had eight hundred operational tanks and inexhaustible supplies of ammunition. He regrouped his forces. He withdrew the Desert Rats and a few infantry brigades from the southern front and moved them to his point of main effort in the north. It was his intention to hold Rommel in check with small attacks until such time as he could deal him the mortal blow. First of all the salient which Rommel held in the far north must be eliminated so that the way was cleared to Sidi Abd el Rahman.

On October 27th effective artillery fire was once again put down on the German-Italian positions. By this time Rommel had concentrated what remained of his mobile reserves behind the northern sector. They were to counter-attack during the course of the afternoon. While the 90th Light Division recaptured Kidney Ridge, the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions were to assault the Mitelriya Ridge. At 14.00 hours Rommel drove to the place where the vanguard of the attacking force was assembling. Three times within a quarter of an hour twenty British bombers bombed the assault units collected there, without cover, in the open desert. At 15.00 hours our dive bombers attacked the British positions. Our entire artillery and anti-aircraft strength in the northern sector put down a brief but intensive concentration upon the proposed assault points. Then the armoured units rolled forward. A fearful hail of British fire immediately descended on them. The defence was unusually strong: heavy anti-tank and tank gun fire quickly brought the attack to a standstill. We suffered severe casualties and were



compelled to retire. The attack by the 90th Light Division likewise broke down under the rain of British shells and bombs. A report from this division to the effect that Kidney Ridge had been recaptured unfortunately proved incorrect. That evening further strong elements of our armoured forces had to be sent forward to plug holes in our front line.

The ether hummed with requests for help to Rome and to Hitler's headquarters. But no matter what was done, there could no longer be any hope of the supply situation improving. It was clear that the British would continue to defeat us piecemeal, since we were for all intents and purposes immobilized on the battlefield. What is more, Montgomery had so far thrown only part of his offensive force into the battle.

During the afternoon of October 28th the British attacked our northern front three times. On each occasion our armoured units succeeded in throwing them back to their start line. But our armour once again suffered sadly. British bombs rained down ceaselessly upon our troops. The supply situation remained disastrous. In Italy every auxiliary cruiser and destroyer was mobilized, to carry the ammunition and fuel which we needed so desperately across to Africa. But most of the ships discharged their cargoes in the port of Benghazi, some six hundred miles behind our front. Experience had taught us that several days must elapse before these supplies could reach the troops.

Since midday on October 28th strong British armoured forces had been identified assembling in the area of Kidney Ridge. We assumed that Montgomery was intending once again to achieve his decisive break-through. We prepared defensive counter-measures, so far as our now depleted forces allowed. Yet no attack was put in during the course of the afternoon. It was not until 21.00 hours that the murderous British barrage came down on the area west of Kidney Ridge. This was followed by a concentration of hundreds of British guns firing into the area north of Kidney Ridge. At 22.00 hours the British assault began. But by collecting together our very last guns we succeeded in defeating the attack, at least for the time being. The battle swayed back and forth with exceptional violence for six hours. Then we were overrun by the enemy.

Meanwhile the Army staff had been moved far away to the West. Rommel wrote in his diary, later published with the title *Krieg ohne Hass*:



'During this night I and a few of my colleagues had remained on the coast road, near the old battle headquarters. From there I could see the continual muzzle flashes and the shells exploding in the darkness. I heard the thunderous roar of the battle. Again and again formations of British night bombers appeared, dropped their deadly cargo on our troops and lit up the whole battle area with their parachute flares, so that all was bright as day. No one can ever measure the burden of anxiety that weighed upon us at this time. That night I scarcely slept at all, walking up and down wondering how the battle would go and what decisions I should take. It seemed to me doubtful whether we could continue for any length of time to resist attacks of the violence which we were now experiencing and which I knew the British could intensify still further. I was quite convinced that I should not await the decisive break-through but should anticipate it by withdrawing westwards. In case of retreat we must do our best to extricate as many tanks and guns as possible and move them with us. In no circumstances must we await the complete destruction of the Alamein front. Next morning I decided that in the event of heavy pressure from Montgomery I would not await the culmination of the battle, but would retreat to the Fuka Position, some fifty miles to the west.'

Towards noon on the 29th we received a crushing signal: the *Louisiana*, sent to replace the *Proserpina*, had been sunk in her turn by aerial torpedoes. But still the major British attack which we were awaiting had not materialized. It was clear to Rommel that the British were regrouping. The front was now comparatively calm. In the northern sector we only had to deal with heavy artillery fire and air attacks. The main weight of Royal Air Force operations was, on this day, directed against the coast road, where many of our lorries were destroyed by British fighter bombers. Rommel ordered that a reconnaissance be carried out of the Fuka Position into which he thought to withdraw.

Meanwhile Montgomery had established the fact that the 90th Light Division had been brought forward into the Sidi Abd el Rahman area to deal with his attacks there. He immediately altered his plan, moving his point of main effort farther south against the thinly held Italian line. There were no longer any operational reserves immediately available to us here. The Australian division was assigned the task of attacking once again during the night of October 30th-31st, with objective the sea-shore. This division was



to prepare the way for the break-through to the west; yet another attack in this area must strengthen Rommel's fears that the main British effort would now be made at the most northerly end of the line. Its primary purpose, however, was to ensure that he kept the 90th Light Division in the Sidi Abd el Rahman area. The New Zealand Division was given the task of attacking westward during the night of October 31st–November 1st and achieving the break-through. Once this had been done, the 10th Corps with the 1st, 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions would push through the gap into the open desert behind our positions and destroy the Africa Corps. This operation *Supercharge* had as objective the annihilation of our combat forces.

During the night of October 30th–31st the 21st Panzer Division was extricated from the front line and put in reserve so that it was again available for mobile operations. This withdrawal was actually being carried out when the heaviest British barrage so far suddenly came down on our northern sector. After one hour's artillery preparation the Australians assaulted, both frontally to pin down our troops there, and from the south against the flank of our most northerly position. Simultaneously British armoured units attacked northwards, overran an Italian battery and by dawn on October 31st thirty heavy tanks had reached the coast road. The only immediate force available for counter-attack was the 35th Reconnaissance Battalion, since the 21st Panzer Division was still in the process of being withdrawn from the front and was not yet ready for action.

Rommel drove at once to Sidi Abd el Rahman and set up his battle headquarters to the east of the mosque. In the meantime the enemy had pushed on to the coast and had thus cut off the whole of the northern salient. General Ritter von Thoma was ordered to counter-attack with the 21st Panzer and 90th Light Divisions. This attack was to start with heavy dive bombing by our Stukas and intensive shell fire by our artillery. The attack went in at about 12.00 hours, but failed to reach its objective. Nevertheless Thoma's forces did succeed in re-establishing contact with the troops previously encircled in what had been the northern salient. Later the enemy was thrown back across the railway line.

At noon on November 1st Rommel reconnoitred the ground across which the battle had been fought. The railway station hut (Thomson's Post) had been marked by the British with Red Cross flags. The burning hulks of eleven tanks surrounded it and behind



it were some forty wrecked British A.F.V.s. The British were removing their many wounded, which was why our artillery had ceased firing.

During the day British bomber formations raided our northern front thirty-four times. The sky was simultaneously filled with hundreds of British fighters, while innumerable fighter-bombers strafed our supply vehicles moving up the coast road. Montgomery still had some eight hundred tanks at his disposal. We could only reckon on being able to commit some ninety German and one hundred and forty Italian tanks in the next battle.

On the evening of November 1st Rommel received the following radio message from Rome:

‘The Duce has asked me to express to you his deep appreciation for the successful counter-attack personally led by yourself. In addition the Duce wishes you to know that he is fully confident that under your leadership the battle now in progress will be brought to a victorious conclusion.

UGO CAVALLERO  
*Marshal of Italy*

It was soon to become apparent that German Supreme Headquarters was as ill-informed concerning the real situation in Africa as was the *Commando Supremo*.

Meanwhile the reconnaissance reports on the Fuka Position were to hand. At its southern end this position was protected against tank attacks by the steepness of the escarpments there: so in case of necessity we might hope to hold it until such time as the British artillery was emplaced against it. In this way we could still gain time for the bringing up of reinforcements and munitions.

‘. . . *To Victory or to Death . . .*’—Adolf Hitler

Montgomery’s decision to move the main thrust of Operation *Supercharge* farther south was to prove very advantageous to him. This attack took place during the night of November 1st–2nd. For three hours shells from hundreds of British guns poured down on Rommel’s main defensive line while wave after wave of Royal Air Force night bombers softened up the Axis troops. Then the British infantry, with tanks in mass formation, assaulted and broke through the front. What was left of the Africa Corps counter-attacked early on the morning of the 2nd and managed to seal off the break-



through, which was already two and a half miles wide. A tank battle of extreme violence developed, with heavy casualties to both sides. The squadrons of the Royal Air Force and the British artillery poured an uninterrupted hail of fire and steel on our troops. Their ammunition was still inexhaustible. Rommel's supply situation, on the other hand, was now desperate. During the course of the day we shot off four hundred and fifty tons of ammunition: all we received was one hundred and ninety tons, and that was delivered by destroyers at Tobruk, three hundred miles away.

Montgomery was now concentrating the tanks which he had been holding in reserve against the point where the break-through had been achieved. Our annihilation was therefore imminent. The Africa Corps now disposed of only thirty-five operational A.F.V.s. Rommel believed that the moment to disengage had come. Already on the morning of November 3rd he had an uneasy feeling that German and Italian Supreme Headquarters might not draw the necessary conclusions from the actual situation, despite all our unequivocal reports. He therefore sent his A.D.C., Lieutenant Berndt, to the 'Wolf's Lair,' two thousand miles away in East Prussia, where Hitler too was 'personally conducting the decisive battle in North Africa.'

Rommel's instructions to Berndt were as follows: 'Explain our situation clearly to the Führer and suggest that the African theatre of operation is probably lost to us. Ask for complete freedom of action for the Panzer Army.' Then Rommel drove off eastward along the coast road.

Montgomery attacked again that morning, but with a certain hesitancy. He seemed to be regrouping his formations with the purpose of exploiting the break-through. This appeared to be the most favourable opportunity for a withdrawal into the Fuka Position, and Rommel therefore ordered the Italians to march away to the west. A steady stream of vehicles set off, while the Italian infantry went on foot: the coast road was crowded. But the British soon recognized what was happening and sent up over two hundred fighter-bombers to strafe our columns. Towards noon Rommel returned to his command post where his signals officer handed him a deciphered radio message. It read:

'To Field-Marshal Rommel.

'I and the German people are watching the heroic defensive battle waged in Egypt, with faithful trust in your powers of leader-

ship and in the bravery of the German-Italian troops under your command. In the situation in which you now find yourself, there can be no other consideration save that of holding fast, of not retreating one step, of throwing every gun and every man into the battle. Important air reinforcements are being transferred to the Commander-in-Chief South during these next few days. The Duce and the *Commando Supremo* will likewise strain every sinew to ensure that you are supplied with the means to continue the battle. Despite his numerical superiority the enemy too will reach the end of his resources. It would not be the first time in history that the stronger will has prevailed against the stronger battalions of the enemy. You can show your troops no other way than that which leads to victory or to death.

ADOLF HITLER'

When we read this order we felt as though we were criminals who, though condemned to die, had been granted a reprieve of forty-eight hours. For an army confronted by a superior foe and immobilized in the desert—as Hitler demanded—will inevitably be surrounded by the enemy and rapidly annihilated. Despite Rommel's unambiguous reports, it was apparent that the 'Wolf's Lair' still had no clear picture of what was happening in Africa. Rommel's entry in his diary reads:

'What we needed was guns, fuel, planes; what we did not need were orders to hold fast.'

He felt as though he had been slapped across the face, and for the first time during the African campaign he did not know what to do. But after an inner struggle he decided to carry out Hitler's order. He wrote in his diary:

'I finally compelled myself to take this decision, because I myself have always demanded unconditional obedience from my soldiers and I therefore wished to accept this principle for myself. If I had known then what I later learned my decision would have been different: in the months to come we were repeatedly compelled to circumvent orders from the Führer and the Duce in order to save the army.'

The orders for the western movement already begun were therefore immediately countermanded. That evening Rommel sent a second courier to Supreme Headquarters. He was to inform Hitler



that the final annihilation of the German-Italian Panzer Army must take place within a matter of days if Hitler's order was to remain valid.

On the morning of November 4th the remnants of the German Africa Corps, together with the 90th Light Division, held a thin front line on either side of the wide sand dune called Tel el Mampsra: though only some twelve feet high, this dune was a commanding feature. To the south was the equally weakened Italian armoured corps. Towards dawn I reported to General Ritter von Thoma, the commander of the Africa Corps, that I was about to set off for the area south of El Daba, where I was to establish a rear command post. For the first time Thoma was wearing a proper uniform, with his general's insignia, orders and decorations, which hitherto in the desert he had never bothered to put on. He now said to me:

'Bayerlein, Hitler's order is a piece of unparalleled madness. I can't go along with this any longer. Go to the El Daba command post. I shall stay here and personally take charge of the defence of Tel el Mampsra.'

I could see that Thoma was utterly disheartened and foresaw no good. His A.D.C., Lieutenant Hartdegen, remained with the general: he had a wireless transmitter. The general put on his great-coat and picked up a small canvas bag. I wondered whether the general intended to die. Then I left Tel el Mampsra and drove to the rear.

It was eight o'clock before the British attacked, after approximately one hour's artillery preparation. Their main effort was directed against Tel el Mampsra. By committing all its forces the Africa Corps was able to hold attacks by two hundred British tanks.

At eleven o'clock Lieutenant Hartdegen appeared at my command post and said:

'General von Thoma has sent me back, with the radio transmitter. He doesn't need it any more. All our tanks, anti-tank guns and ack-ack have been destroyed on Tel el Mampsra. I don't know what has happened to the general.'

I immediately climbed into a small armoured reconnaissance car and drove off eastwards. Suddenly a hail of armour-piercing shot was whistling all about me. In the noontime haze I could see countless black monsters far away in front. They were Montgomery's tanks, the 10th Hussars. I jumped out of the armoured car and beneath the burning midday sun ran as fast as I could towards Tel



el Mampsra. It was a place of death, of burning tanks and smashed flak guns, without a living soul. But then, about two hundred yards away from the sandhole in which I was lying, I saw a man standing erect beside a burning tank, apparently impervious to the intense fire which criss-crossed about him. It was General von Thoma. The British Shermans which were closing up on Tel el Mampsra had halted in a wide half-circle. What should I do? The general would probably regard it as cowardice on my part were I not to go forward and join him. But to run through the curtain of fire which lay between General von Thoma and myself would have been to court certain death. I thought for moment or two. Then the British tanks began to move forward once again. There was now no fire being put down on Tel el Mampsra. Thoma stood there, rigid and motionless as a pillar of salt, with his canvas bag still in his hand. A Bren carrier was driving straight towards him, with two Shermans just behind. The British soldiers signalled to Thoma. At the same time one hundred and fifty fighting vehicles poured across Tel el Mampsra like a flood.

I ran off westwards as fast as my legs could carry me. My car had vanished. After a while I met a staff car which took me to the command post at El Daba. There I found Rommel. I told him what I had seen. Huge dust clouds were now visible both south-east and south of the command post. The Italian tanks of the 20th Corps were fighting their last, desperate battle with some hundred heavy British tanks that had punched into the Italians' open right flank. After putting up a brave resistance, the Italian corps was annihilated.

The Africa Corps signals officer brought Rommel a decoded message, from the 10th Hussars to Montgomery, which our people had intercepted. It read:

'We have just captured a general named Ritter von Thoma.'

The Field-Marshal took me aside, and said:

'Bayerlein, what we tried with all our might to prevent has now happened. Our front is smashed and the enemy is pouring through into our rear area. There can no longer be any question of obeying Hitler's order. We're withdrawing to the Fuka Position so as to save what still can be saved.

'Colonel Bayerlein,' Rommel went on, 'I'm putting you in command of the Africa Corps. There's no one else to whom I can entrust it. And if it should happen later on that the Führer court-martials us for our disobedience, we'll both have to answer squarely for our



decision today. Do your duty as best you can. All your orders to the troops carry my authority. You may say this to the senior commanders, in the event of your having any trouble with them.'

'I shall do my best, sir,' I replied. Then Rommel got into his armoured command vehicle, to visit the other units of his beaten army and to give the orders for the retreat.

### *Between Two Fires—the End*

I gave the order to disengage as soon as darkness fell. Rommel's decision at least made it possible to save the meagre remnants of our motorized forces from destruction. But this twenty-four hours' delay had cost the army its entire infantry strength as well as a great number of tanks, lorries and guns. The army, as a result, was no longer able to hold up Montgomery's pursuit anywhere. It was no longer possible to organize the troops since only a rapid retreat could save them from British air attacks and get them out of range of the British tank guns and artillery. Any vehicle which failed to reach the coast road or flee across the desert at once was lost, for Montgomery pushed forward with surprising speed and overran everything he met.

On the morning of the next day a wireless signal was received from Hitler:

'I agree to the withdrawal of your army into the Fuka Position.'

But that position had already been overrun by Montgomery's tanks. We continued to retreat westwards, on a broad front. Montgomery did not succeed in catching the Desert Fox and his Africans. In boldness and elasticity of movement Rommel was far and away the better general of the two. One by one we gave up our old prizes in the Libyan desert, places which had cost so much in blood. Mersa Matruh, Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk, that Verdun of the Western Desert, all were rapidly and now finally evacuated. For the last time the armies raced across Cyrenaica, a province which had changed hands four times in two years.

On November 8th General Eisenhower's Allied Expeditionary Corps landed in Morocco and Algiers, with Tunisia as its objective. The opening of Operation *Torch* meant that Rommel was now between two fires. This was the end.

# FROM EL ALAMEIN TO STALINGRAD

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

AT El Alamein the British armed forces showed that they had achieved a very high standard of performance. They were well trained, excellently equipped and above all supported by the conviction that the ultimate victory must be theirs. Last but not least, they enjoyed a supply system both adequate and reliable, the lack of which had seriously affected their German enemies. Already at El Alamein the additional help reaching the British from the factories of the United States was beginning to make itself felt: one need only recall the Flying Fortresses. But it must be stated that the British could not have made better use of the good fortune which had permitted the evacuation of their troops from Dunkirk; these had become the cadres for the powerful new formations which were now appearing on the battlefield.

Once Rommel had begun his retreat he was well aware that this time there would be no 'come-back,' as in the previous January. His inferiority in *matériel* was too great, and it was quite obvious that there could no longer be any hope of improvement in the supply situation. After El Alamein no further convoys reached the Libyan ports, but only an occasional smaller ship which, travelling alone, had managed to escape the Argus eyes of the Royal Navy and of the R.A.F. Supplies brought in by air were scanty and, since this means of transportation was dependent upon the weather, unreliable. Air supply could never quantitatively replace sea supply.

If any further proof were needed of the basic deterioration of Germany's position, this was provided by the news of Allied landings in Morocco and Algiers on November 8th, 1942, under General Eisenhower. The German Armed Forces Supreme Command was taken completely by surprise. Now even a child could see that Rommel's army was caught between two fires. This was the development which Rommel had long feared, though what he had anticipated was a large-scale British landing in perhaps the Tripoli or the Benghazi area. What had in fact happened was far more ominous: the armed forces of the United States of America were now actively and directly engaged in the war against Germany—despite all the boastful pronouncements by Hitler, Goebbels and Goering that this could never happen. It was only now that the life and death battle was truly joined.



No one could be surprised that the North African French, after a brief and spasmodic defence, embraced the Allied cause: the short-sighted and hard-hearted policy pursued by Germany in her dealings with France during the past years had paved the way for this. It all happened exactly as the pessimists had feared and prophesied. Events in North Africa compelled Hitler to march into the hitherto unoccupied part of Metropolitan France. Thus all France was now under direct German control. What remained of the French Army in Europe was disarmed, while the Colonial Army joined the ranks of the Allies in North Africa. The French fleet at Toulon avoided falling into German hands by scuttling itself.

Curiously enough the Allies had not simultaneously seized Tunisia. This enabled the German Commander-in-Chief South, Field-Marshal Kesselring, whose headquarters were in Italy, to send such forces as were immediately available across to Tunis; they were weak, but strong enough to occupy that town and form a bridgehead. The French garrison holding the fortified naval base at Bizerta was persuaded to lay down its arms. Later further German troops were ferried across, with a total strength equivalent to four divisions, and these became the Fifth Panzer Army. One result of this new situation was that for the time being all available supplies were sent to the Tunisian theatre of operations, so that Rommel's army was more neglected than ever. He was so short of fuel that for this reason alone he was repeatedly compelled to ignore favourable chances for launching counter-attacks.

By the end of November, Rommel was back at the El Agheila position, in the Great Sirte, whence he had launched his two offensives of March 1941 and January 1942. He knew that he might expect a few days of quiet here before Montgomery's army could close up on him, and he therefore flew unannounced to see Hitler: he hoped to persuade him that the evacuation of this theatre of war was now imperative. His proposals were harshly turned down, and he returned to Africa a broken-hearted man. His German troops were to fight on, to the bitter end.

In North-west Africa the situation remained, for the time being, calm, for the Allied advance eastwards was very slow. It was the calm before the storm. There was only small-scale fighting along the Tunisian-Algerian border and the German forces even succeeded in gaining ground to the west. Thus it proved possible to consolidate the Tunisian bridgehead and even to create a thinly held front, which might better be described as an outpost line, along the western border of Tunisia. The original crisis was therefore mastered and by Christmas of 1942 the situation appeared more or less stable. However, heavy weapons,



## COMMENTARY

particularly artillery pieces and tanks, as well as ammunition, were to be in short supply until the end.

The North African landings had made one fact plain beyond dispute, and with all its terrifying consequences: this was the almost limitless air supremacy which the Allies now enjoyed. Only very rarely did the German and the occasional Italian fighters succeed in diverting the British bomber squadrons from their targets; again and again a deadly rain of bombs descended on our ground troops, which could seldom even find cover in the open desert. Rommel had already realized at El Alamein the decisive nature of these bomb carpets, which must settle the outcome of the war unless a modern fighter force were created capable of inflicting heavy losses on the enemy bombers. It is true that the 'old Africa hands' of the Africa Corps had become accustomed to such bombings; Field-Marshal Kesselring might well describe them as the troops least susceptible to air attack in all the world. But this was not the case with the majority of the Italian troops in Africa, who lacked combat experience. What, then, would happen when it came to a defence of the Italian peninsula itself? This battle must inevitably be fought largely by the Italian Home Army, which had not even smelt gunpowder as yet.

At sea, too, Allied superiority became ever more marked. This was quickly revealed in the operations connected with the transports to Tunisia. Though the sea passage was short, this advantage was more or less neutralized by the intensity of the attack. Our shortage of merchant tonnage was accentuated by the daily sinkings, and the trip across the Sicilian narrows became a veritable 'trip to paradise' for our brave Italian and German seamen. Many men and untold treasure went to the bottom there. But the truly astonishing fact was that despite the utmost exertion on the part of our air and sea forces, who pressed their attacks home regardless of losses, the Allied landings in North Africa were carried out almost without interruption. It is true that many ships were being sunk by our dive-bombers and U-boats, but in view of the massive production now coming from the American shipyards, these not inconsiderable losses passed almost unnoticed.

During these weeks, while anxious German eyes were turned towards the south, a situation was being created away to the east, along the banks of the Volga, which was to result in a catastrophe of far more decisive importance. In the next chapter the man who was then Chief of the Army General Staff, and who struggled as best he could to avoid the impending disaster, describes the sequence of events which is known to history as the Battle of Stalingrad.





PART FOUR

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# Stalingrad

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*Colonel-General*  
KURT ZEITZLER



KURT ZEITZLER was Chief of Staff of XXII Corps from 1940 to 1941. He became Chief of Staff, Army Group D, in April 1942 and later in the year was made Chief of the Army General Staff, holding this appointment until July 1944, when he was replaced after the attempt to assassinate Hitler. General Zeitzler holds the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. He is now 60 years of age.





COLONEL-GENERAL KURT ZEITZLER

### *Hitler's Intentions*

**H**ITLER'S principal intentions for the summer offensive of 1942 were the capture of Stalingrad and of the Caucasus.

At first glance these objectives had considerable appeal. If the German Army could cut Russia's main north-south line of communications by crossing the Volga in the Stalingrad area and if, simultaneously, the production of the oilfields in and about the Caucasus could be harnessed to the German war effort, then the whole situation in the East would be changed and the future outcome of the war profoundly affected thereby. Such was certainly Hitler's train of thought. Nor did his immoderate plans end there. He intended next to send fast, mobile columns through or around the Caucasus into India.

So far so good. There were, however, other factors to be considered.

Military objectives must always correspond to the forces and other means available for their attainment. From a purely tactical point of view it is not enough simply to reach an objective: consolidation upon the objective is also essential. If this is not achieved, the forces involved will have over-reached themselves, and the offensive operation, no matter how attractive the target, will contain within itself and from its beginning the germ of failure if not of actual defeat.

The first objective, Stalingrad, lay nearly three hundred miles beyond the front-line that existed in the spring of 1942: the Caucasus was even farther away, over three hundred and fifty miles distant. Nor were these objectives close to one another. Being some three hundred and fifty miles apart, the two operations must diverge.

The question now arose whether there were sufficient forces at present available to capture two such remote and distant objectives. The answer was plainly in the negative. Could such forces be procured? This question was put to Hitler by his military advisers, and the solution decided upon was, it is said, suggested to him by General Jodl. This was to demand fresh divisions from Germany's allies, thereby creating a total force upon the Eastern Front corresponding to Hitler's intentions for the coming campaign. This was the first fatal decision of the year.



Every German commander and soldier who had fought in the East in 1941 had seen that the troops of Germany's allies were incapable of standing up to the rigours of war in that cruel theatre. Furthermore, in 1941 the non-German troops engaged had consisted largely of small detachments, élite units, which had usually fought within German formations. In 1942, however, these non-German soldiers were to be massed in homogeneous corps or even armies of one nationality, fighting at vast distances from their homelands. Such organizations were bound to imperil our entire Eastern Front.

This was obvious. But Hitler was intoxicated by numbers, and saw only the vast increase in divisions which now appeared upon his staff maps. General Halder, who was my predecessor as Chief of the General Staff, certainly realized the dangers inherent in this plan and pointed them out to Hitler repeatedly and earnestly. However, the dictator brushed aside his warnings.

### *First Operations*

The offensive was launched at the end of June, and to begin with German divisions were the spearhead of the attack, with the troops of our allies following up behind. There were two army groups involved. On the left Army Group B was under Field-Marshal von Bock, later replaced by Field-Marshal von Weichs, and on the right Army Group A, commanded by Field-Marshal List. Hitler's Supreme Headquarters and the Army High Command moved from East Prussia and occupied quarters in and about Vinitsa, in the Ukraine.

The campaign opened with a series of victories. In July Krasnodar on the Kuban River and Voroshilovsk close by the foothills of the Caucasian mountains were captured. Great numbers of prisoners were taken. By the end of August the German flag had been hoisted on the peak of the Elbrus, the highest point in the Caucasus. At the same time our advance guards reached the Volga near Stalingrad.

It then seemed as though our first and principal objectives had almost been obtained. The appearance was deceptive, for the advance was halted. No further progress was made in the Caucasus, and in Stalingrad the Russians began to put up a desperate resistance.

## *Crisis in the High Command*

The first result of this halt to our advance was the removal from his command of Field-Marshal List. For some time no successor was appointed, and Army Group A was commanded by a deputy.

In late September Colonel-General Halder was also dismissed from his post as Chief of the General Staff. I was at the time Chief of Staff of an army group. Without being told what was envisaged, I was suddenly summoned to Supreme Headquarters. I took an aeroplane and as soon as I arrived Hitler treated me, as was his custom, to a monologue of several hours' duration. It was not possible for me to interrupt this harangue, in which Hitler expressed his deep dissatisfaction with the course of events on the Eastern Front and particularly the break-down of the offensive. As usual Hitler did not look for the true causes of this—that is to say, the erroneous choice of objectives and the fact that the means available were inadequate to achieve the desired ends. Instead, Hitler chose the course, far more convenient to himself, of blaming the troops and their commanders. He referred with particular bitterness to what he described as the incompetence of Field-Marshal List and of Colonel-General Halder.

Suddenly he broke off and ended his monologue with the words: 'And so I have decided to appoint you Chief of the General Staff of the Army.' This was his usual method. Whenever he made a mistake he placed the blame upon someone else, who was then dismissed and a new man appointed in his place. He never drew the right conclusions from the miscarriage of his plans; had he done so, though he could not of course have put right the past, he could at least have diminished the future effects of his errors.

I took up my duties as Chief of the General Staff and immediately became aware of the most peculiar atmosphere which prevailed at Supreme Headquarters as a result of the break-down of the offensive in the East. To an officer coming from an operational staff in the field, this atmosphere was not only weird but positively incredible. It was compounded of mistrust and anger. Nobody had any faith in his colleagues. Hitler distrusted everyone.

Many officers, believing that they were in disgrace, appeared utterly disheartened. List and Halder were not the only objects of Hitler's spleen: Jodl too was under a cloud. Hitler's fury was directed against the Eastern armies as a whole and particularly against the army and army group commanders there. He now led an entirely



retired life, brooding upon his suspicions. He would shake hands with no general. No longer did he take his meals with the members of his personal headquarters and staff, but preferred to eat alone. When attending staff conferences he would enter, bow stiffly, and listen to his advisers' brief reports with a surly frown. Then he would once again give the assembled officers a stiff little bow and leave the room.

List and Halder were Hitler's scapegoats for the failure of the offensive. The story of Jodl's temporary disgrace, as I heard it at the time, is somewhat more complicated. Jodl was Chief of the Armed Forces Command Staff and, as such, Hitler's closest military adviser. Hitler had sent him to the Caucasus as his personal emissary. His mission was to drive commanders and troops alike into a resumption of the offensive, so that the Caucasian mountains at least might be crossed. But Jodl, when he arrived there, was soon convinced that the troops were completely exhausted and that any further advance was out of the question.

Jodl returned to Supreme Headquarters and expressed this opinion to Hitler. It was ill-received. Hitler shouted at him: 'Your orders were to drive the commanders and troops forward: not to tell me that this is impossible.' Hitler openly compared Jodl's report on conditions in the Caucasus with the celebrated Hentzsch report of the First World War. (Colonel Hentzsch, an emissary of the German Supreme Command in 1914, had reported on the Western Front in terms which led to a retreat: he has been blamed for the German defeat on the Marne.) Jodl was, in fact, in complete disgrace and his replacement as Chief of the Armed Forces Command Staff was seriously envisaged: his successor was to be General Paulus, the commander of the Sixth Army.

In the atmosphere which thus prevailed at Supreme Headquarters, any frank and objective discussion of the situation was impossible. This could have only one result: the conduct of our military operations was bound to suffer and the burden would be borne by the hard-fighting troops in the field.

Such were my first impressions when I took up my new appointment as Chief of the General Staff. They were far from reassuring.

### *The Situation on the Eastern Front*

If the atmosphere at Supreme Headquarters was distressing, the situation on the Eastern Front as a whole was anything but comfortable.



Our two northern groups of armies, Army Group North under Field-Marshal von Kuchler and Army Group Centre under Field-Marshal von Kluge, were not directly involved in our summer offensive, and for the time being their sectors were comparatively quiet. But prognostications for the future were not happy, chiefly owing to the absence of any considerable reserves in their rear areas. There were a number of potential danger-points along this part of the front, particularly Lake Ladoga, north-east of Leningrad, and the Demensk pocket, where a German force was almost encircled save for a single narrow corridor which still remained open.

As for the other two army groups, both engaged in the summer offensive, two future crises were already in the making. The first was connected with the long left flank of Field-Marshal von Weichs' Army Group B, north-west of Stalingrad: this flank was held entirely by non-German divisions. The second was created by the great gap between the Caucasus and Stalingrad: our mobile troops might and did range this vast area of steppe, but they could not build a line.

Our Eastern armies were in a bad way, through no fault of their own. They had fought superbly and were, indeed, still doing so. Their performance appears all the more remarkable when it is realized that they had been in action, in many cases without a break, for close on eighteen months and almost always against a numerically superior enemy. Their equipment had suffered heavily in consequence. They themselves were overstrained and overtired. Units had not received adequate replacements and were below strength both in men and in weapons. Such were the conditions in which they were now asked to perform a task which, even in ideal circumstances, was well-nigh superhuman.

That was the situation along the Eastern Front at the end of September 1942. Hitler was, of course, kept fully informed, but he chose to ignore the great difficulties facing our troops. He continued to insist that the two attacking army groups make the greatest possible efforts to continue their advance, despite the fact that their strength was exhausted. He was determined to capture the rest of Stalingrad, the Caucasian oilfields and the Caucasus itself. Since the offensive had ground to a halt at all points, he decided that it must be set in motion again by small-scale attacks. In Stalingrad he ordered a series of shock-troop assaults, with the purpose of capturing the city block by block, even building by building. In the



Caucasus likewise he ordered one tactical assault after the other. In fact he wished the offensive to be continued in miniature, and at any price.

During my first few weeks as Chief of the General Staff I made a thorough study of the situation on the Eastern Front, of the state of our troops, and of the forces available to the enemy. Then I asked that Hitler allow me to present a long, detailed and strictly confidential report. This request was granted.

### *My Report on the Situation*

I began my report with an exact and circumstantial description of the situation on the Eastern Front as seen through German eyes, which was followed by a similar description from the enemy's point of view, this latter being based upon the meticulous work of the Army High Command Intelligence Section called 'Foreign Armies East.' The second part of my report dealt with the conclusions which must be drawn from the respective German and Russian situations, and with the consequent developments which must therefore be expected within the next few weeks or months. I ended my report with five definite postulates.

Part One of my report was couched in terms comprehensible to a non-expert and was abundantly supported with statistics, graphs and maps. For example, break-downs were given of the exact number of German and allied soldiers, heavy weapons, anti-tank guns, artillery pieces, etc., per mile on various sectors of the front, which were contrasted with similar figures for the Russian forces engaged. This displayed the enemy's numerical superiority in the most striking and impressive fashion. The picture was reinforced by statistics concerning Russian reserves of man-power, equipment, arms and ammunition, the monthly production figures of the enemy's munition and tank factories and the mounting flow of supplies reaching him from the United States.

Such knowledge was essential if one were to form a true judgment of one's own and the enemy's strength and thus be able to appreciate probable developments in the near future. As Chief of the General Staff I succeeded in making these facts clear beyond dispute. And considering Hitler's nature, this alone was something of a triumph. For once he did not, as was his custom, interrupt me when the facts I was reporting displeased him or were, to use his own phrase, 'defeatist.' Usually he would put an end to so factual a



report by ordering the speaker to stop or even by throwing a tantrum. However, he had a passion for figures and statistics, and the large number of these that I produced to support my arguments perhaps impressed him, as did my easily comprehensible diagrams. Alternatively it may be that he simply did not wish to make the 'new man' angry at so early a stage of our relationship.

In any case I had the satisfaction of beginning my career as Chief of General Staff by telling Hitler the plain, unvarnished truth. So far so good. But now came the most difficult part of my report, the five demands or postulates which followed from this General Staff report and which I formulated as follows:

1. Owing to the summer offensive, the territory to be occupied in the East no longer corresponded to the size of the occupying army. In a word, there were too few soldiers for too much ground. Unless this were adjusted, a catastrophe must occur.

2. The most perilous sector of the Eastern Front was undoubtedly the long, thinly-held flank stretching from Stalingrad to the right boundary of Army Group Centre. Furthermore, this sector was held by the weakest and least reliable of our troops, Rumanians, Italians and Hungarians. This created an enormous danger, which must be eliminated.

3. The flow of men, equipment, weapons and ammunition to the Eastern Front was entirely insufficient. Each month losses exceeded replacements. This must have disastrous consequences.

4. The Russians were both better trained and better led in 1942 than they had been in 1941. This fact should be realized and taken into account. Greater caution on our part was essential.

5. This was a detailed point concerning better servicing of the troops, a more skilful utilization of the railways which would ensure greater mobility, and other, largely technical, matters.

To my astonishment Hitler listened to these conclusions and demands without flying off the handle. Indeed, they even seemed to make some impression on him. When I had finished he smiled, and said:

'You are too pessimistic. Here on the Eastern Front we've been through worse periods than this before you joined us, and we've survived. We'll get over our present difficulties too.' As for my final conclusions, he did his best to minimize them in typical fashion. For example, he said: 'Of course at some points along the front the German soldiers are out-numbered. But they are far superior in



quality to the enemy. Our weapons are better too. And in the near future we shall have new weapons which will be better still.'

Thus did Hitler dismiss my report, and regard the demands raised as settled. As Chief of the General Staff I hoped that at least some part of what I had said would stick in his mind, that he would ponder over my remarks and that my report might, after all, bear some fruit. I had already learned that in order to carry a point with Hitler it was necessary to reiterate it over and over again. This I did, during the weeks that followed, repeating in particular my five demands. Meanwhile what was in fact done during the weeks that remained to us before the great Russian counter-attack?

### *German Preparations*

My five points made a greater impression upon Hitler than I had expected—or than he ever admitted. In particular, he was now aware of the danger constituted by the long flank between Stalingrad and Army Group Centre. This was proof that it was possible for his advisers to impress a point upon him, provided that it were repeated frequently enough and that the adviser adhered inflexibly to his original attitude. By following these courses, I succeeded in making Hitler aware of the danger to the left flank of Army Group B. Once he was aware of the peril, there were three possible ways of coping with the situation.

The first would have been the basic and also the most effective one. This would have been to withdraw the Stalingrad front westwards, thus shortening or even doing away with the endangered flank and freeing a large number of divisions which could then be employed elsewhere. We would thus have had a new, strong front and would have simultaneously created the indispensable reserve in the form of a *masse de manœuvre* located behind it. The virtues of this solution, which was undoubtedly the best possible, must be obvious to anyone. But it would have entailed the abandonment of Stalingrad, that is to say of the major result of our summer offensive. Or, to put it in other terms, it would have meant the belated rectification of the Supreme Command's initial errors when planning that offensive.

This solution proved totally unacceptable to Hitler. Indeed, he lost his temper if such a project were so much as hinted at in his presence, for on principle, and regardless of the circumstances, he always refused to countenance the abandonment of any territory



whatsoever. This principle, if so it can be called, was strongly reinforced in the case of Stalingrad by the famous speech which he had made to the German people in October of that year. He had then said: 'Where the German soldier sets foot, there he remains,' and: 'You may rest assured that nobody will ever drive us away from [Stalingrad].' These utterances had strengthened him in his own obstinacy, and the retention of Stalingrad had now become with him a question of his personal prestige. Nothing could then make him change his mind.

The second way of dealing with the situation was really a modification of the first. This would have meant the retention of our foothold in Stalingrad for the time being but the making of the necessary preparations to withdraw at a later date, at the latest immediately before the Russian counter-attack. This was a compromise solution, and contained all the disadvantages inherent in a compromise; but at least it was a solution of a sort, although it contained one large imponderable. Would the Russian climate permit such a withdrawal when the critical moment came? This question made the second solution a dangerous one. In any case, Hitler refused to accept it or to order that plans be made accordingly. However, the impression he gave was that he liked it, for the simple reason that it offered him the chance of procrastination. He never made a disagreeable decision, if he could see any way of postponing it until later. He embellished this habitual hesitancy of his by referring to it as a policy of 'letting the situation mature.'

The third method of dealing with the impending crisis would have been to withdraw the unreliable non-German armies now holding the threatened sector and to replace them with good, well-equipped German divisions backed by adequate reserves. For this solution the German High Command quite lacked the necessary reserves of troops and equipment. In order to replace the Hungarians and so on with Germans, it would have been necessary to take the latter from other sectors of the Eastern Front. Their lateral transfer would have been difficult at any time, but all the more so in view of the very bad communications in Russia. There was also a very real danger that the Russian counter-offensive which we now expected would hit the threatened flank at the very time when the reliefs were being carried out. This solution was therefore also ruled out.

Thus none of the three major solutions to the problem was chosen, two being abandoned owing to Hitler's obduracy, the third



on account of the prevailing circumstances. Only what might be described as minor expedients remained, and the General Staff was well aware that these could not affect the situation fundamentally. Indeed, it was open to question whether they would in fact be of any use at all. Nevertheless we had to do what we could, if only to win time when the enemy should attack and thus facilitate the eventual carrying out of major solution No. 2. Perhaps when the danger was actual, and not as now merely hypothetical, Hitler would see reason and order that this major solution be adopted.

Some of these minor expedients which were now employed were as follows:

A small reserve was created behind the threatened flank. It consisted of a single panzer corps, comprising two armoured divisions, one German and the other Rumanian. It was in every respect a very weak corps.

Small German units, such as anti-tank battalions drawn from O.K.W. reserve, were interspersed among the non-German divisions. These units were intended to bolster the threatened front. By means of these 'bolster tactics' it was hoped to stiffen the non-German divisions, to encourage and help them to resist. Should the non-German units be overrun, the 'bolster units' were to stand fast and to limit the enemy's penetration or break-through. By holding out in this way, they should create more favourable conditions for our counter-attack. This was a well-thought-out plan. Its disadvantages, however, were apparent. Should the allied troops between the 'bolster units' collapse too fast, or too completely, and should sufficient forces for our counter-attack not be available in time, then the 'bolster units' would find themselves hopelessly situated and must eventually be written off as a total loss. These 'bolster tactics' were thus of very doubtful value.

Liaison groups, containing German General Staff officers and signal units, were attached to the senior staffs of the non-German formations. These allied staffs lacked both the experience and the discipline of equivalent German headquarters, while their command channels and signal systems were awkward and slow. It was hoped that the new liaison groups would compensate for this.

Radio deception was practised on a large scale, with the purpose of concealing from the enemy the fact that there were no German troops along the threatened flank and also of giving him a false picture of our strength in that sector.

These were but some of the measures now taken, which required



much complicated staff work, great attention to detail and considerable powers of organization. The experts were well aware that they were not enough, but for the reasons I have already outlined they were carried out as efficiently as was possible. However, the very carrying out of these measures constituted a danger in itself: were Hitler to be convinced that all the necessary preparations had been made, he would become over-confident. Therefore it was necessary to draw Hitler's attention over and over again to the gravity of the situation, to the five postulates which I have given above, and to the only two true solutions which existed. This was done, despite Hitler's furious outbursts of rage: it was a matter of duty.

As regards points 1, 3, 4 and 5, with which I had terminated my report, and to which I referred repeatedly, Hitler finally accepted them and began to act accordingly. Unfortunately he was generally satisfied with makeshift or compromise measures, which frequently came too late.

One measure which could be and was taken was to set up a permanent reconnaissance system, with the necessary signals communications, to cover the threatened flank. This involved close co-ordination of effort by the appropriate sections of the Army General Staff, the Air Force General Staff and the intelligence units with the headquarters of Army Group B. The army group commander and his trusted chief of staff shared our apprehensions which they made known to Hitler by means of their situation reports and estimates of enemy intentions. Our complex reconnaissance measures soon confirmed these. The enemy was slowly but steadily strengthening his forces, opposite the endangered flank. This was beyond dispute. Furthermore, interrogation of prisoners and deserters began to reveal the presence in this sector of very high-grade Russian divisions. From this only one conclusion could be drawn. An attack was imminent.

### *An Appreciation of Russian Intentions*

It now appeared that the Russian High Command had pursued the same train of thought as the German General Staff. They had decided to open their winter offensive with an attack upon the left flank of Army Group B, an operation which, if successful, must reap them great benefits. They had not been taken in by our deception measures and were well aware that this sector was manned by non-German troops who would, in their estimate, be less 'tough' in the defence.



Still, we had no way of knowing for sure exactly what point along the deep flank they would choose to attack, whether the Rumanian-held sector close to Stalingrad, the Italian sector farther to the west, or that held by the Hungarians which was farther west still. From a purely tactical point of view, an operation against the extreme west of the flank would have been the best choice. But this would be a very bold decision, and the Russian High Command was reluctant to take so great a risk. They seemed to prefer a more cautious plan which would not commit them too far afield.

During the first half of November—by which time Hitler's Supreme Headquarters and the Army High Command had moved back from Vinitza to East Prussia—the picture of the future Russian offensive became increasingly clear. They were going to attack north-west of Stalingrad, probably in the sector held by the Rumanians. What we could not yet gauge was the date on which this attack would be launched.

### *Before the Attack*

Though Hitler had repeatedly refused to accept any of the major solutions, he permitted the execution of our makeshift expedients to strengthen the threatened front. But even now he would not abandon his offensive plans to capture Stalingrad. Furiously he ordered that house-to-house fighting within the city continue, and Sixth Army suffered further useless casualties as a result. Indeed the very last O.K.W. reserves available, high-class assault-engineer battalions, were flown to Stalingrad, where they were to capture the built-up area by 'new storm tactics.' These battalions were wiped out. And all the while the growing menace north-west of the city became more and more plain to see.

Early in November Hitler made a political speech, in which he said:

'I wished to reach the Volga at a certain point, near a certain city. That city happens to bear the name of Stalin himself. . . . I wished to take that city: we do not make exaggerated claims, and I can now tell you that we have captured it. Only a very few small parts of it are not yet in our hands. Now people may ask: "Why does the army not advance faster?" But I do not wish to see a second Verdun, I prefer to reach my objectives by means of limited assaults. Time is of no importance.' This was a strange speech: Hitler spoke half as a Supreme Commander and half as a party



agitator. There was a great danger that once Hitler had declared his intentions to Germany and the world he would refuse ever to modify them, for their fulfilment then became with him a matter of his personal prestige. And once their prestige is involved dictators are, as is well known, extremely touchy. Moreover Hitler was a politician, not a soldier. By announcing his intentions in this fashion, he thought to define once and for all the objectives of his commanders and troops and thus to strengthen their determination and resolve. Hitler believed that when he had spoken, they would hold fast. He did not realize how his words would sound in the ears of the senior commanders, the junior officers and the soldiers fighting bitterly, and dying, in and about Stalingrad. Nor did he understand the effect that they would have upon the Army General Staff and its Chief; incidentally, I was not consulted before the speech was made and first learned of its contents when I heard it over the air.

During these first weeks of November I submitted my basic demands to Hitler over and over again. The picture presented by our reconnaissance grew daily more complete. We worked closely with the Air Force, and Russian troop concentrations were attacked. More could not be done. One hope remained. Despite everything, it might yet be possible to persuade Hitler to accept the major solution at the eleventh hour. My policy was to wear him down by constant repetition of the facts.

Meanwhile the whole General Staff, from the most senior departmental chief to the most junior captain, shared my apprehension to the full and anxiously awaited the Russian attack which we all now knew was imminent. If it succeeded it was bound, by the nature of its direction, to put the entire Stalingrad army in a desperate plight. It is awful to foresee a coming catastrophe and yet to be incapable of preventing it: to see the only remedy disregarded and rejected by the only man with authority to act, in this case Hitler.

At Army Group B both the Commander-in-Chief and his Chief of Staff estimated the situation in exactly the same way as myself. They too were of the opinion that only the major solution could now avert the impending disaster. They too were made miserable by their inability to affect the course of events. All they could do was to draw Hitler's attention to the true state of affairs by means of their reports and estimates of the situation. They focused their attention on the threatened sector, in order that they might recognize the critical moment at the earliest possible hour.

Of course attempts were made to destroy the enemy's columns



and troop concentrations by means of air attack and long-range artillery bombardment. But, as always happens, the most that this could hope to achieve would be a postponement of the date fixed for the attack. To prevent such an attack completely is only possible when one possesses total, overwhelming air supremacy, and can keep the enemy's railways, road and assembly areas under constant attack by a very strong air force. We did not possess such supremacy, nor an air force of the requisite size.

Such was the situation when the Russian winter broke upon us with all its fury. We knew that the attack would not now be long delayed.

### *The Russian Offensive Opens*

Early on the morning of November 19, 1942, the Army High Command, now located in East Prussia, received the following signal: *Very heavy artillery bombardment of the whole Rumanian front north-west of Stalingrad.* Our liaison staff had seen to it that this intelligence reached us, via Army Group B, without delay. Thus did we learn that the attack had begun, and we knew that it must develop as we had foreseen and as we had so often told Hitler. It only remained to be seen whether or not we had estimated Russian strength correctly.

A reply was sent to Army Group B:

'Panzer Corps H to be made ready for action immediately. Application has already been made to Hitler for its release from reserve.'

Hitler had laid down that this single reserve corps was not to be committed without his personal approval being first obtained. Therefore as soon as I had heard of the Russian barrage and had assumed that the situation would develop as anticipated, I asked for the release of this corps. Should events fail to follow the expected course, such caution would have done no harm.

Hitler, however, was not in East Prussia at the time, but was travelling to Munich or Berchtesgaden in his special command train, accompanied by his private staff which included Field-Marshal Keitel and General Jodl. I telephoned him, told him the news, and with considerable difficulty persuaded him to release Panzer Corps H from O.K.W. reserve and give it to Army Group B. He would have preferred to postpone this decision even then, and await further reports from the front. It required, as usual, a tremendous effort to convince him that it would then be too late.



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I regarded my success in securing the release of the Panzer Corps as a personal triumph, and Army Group B was also delighted.

Meanwhile the Russian shelling of the Rumanian positions had become very intense indeed. Then, under cover of a heavy snow-storm and with the thermometer showing 20 degrees of frost Centigrade, the Red Army attacked. A mass of tanks advanced on the Rumanians, with infantry riding on them or following close behind. The Russians everywhere enjoyed immense numerical superiority. Almost immediately the Rumanian front became a scene of chaos and utter confusion.

Army Group B now received a flood of often contradictory reports, which were passed on to the Army High Command. These gave a general picture of panic rout on the part of the Rumanians and of Russian tanks appearing deep in our rear. Other reports described a heroic resistance and the destruction of many Red Army tanks. Finally the situation became clarified. The Russians had broken through the Rumanian front at two points. Between these break-throughs, and on the left flank, Rumanian troops and German 'bolster units' continued to fight most bravely against overwhelming enemy forces. As soon as Army Group realized what was happening it sent in Panzer Corps H to counter-attack those Russian units which had made the bigger break-through.

I kept Hitler constantly informed by telephone about the situation as it developed at the front. Again and again I pointed out to him that the time had now come to carry out the major solution, that is to say the withdrawal from Stalingrad, or if not to carry it out at least to make all the necessary preparations for the execution of this plan in the immediate future. This only angered Hitler. As usual he clutched at every hopeful straw. He said that we should wait and see what effect the commitment of Panzer Corps H would have on the course of the battle. When I told him that the most we could expect from this corps was that it would slow down the Russian penetration, but that it would not stop the enemy's advance, he simply dismissed this appreciation as unduly pessimistic.

Meanwhile the situation continued to deteriorate. The Russians widened their two penetrations and their tanks drove on deeper into the rear. Panzer Corps H, which was preparing to attack, was itself attacked by the leading Russian armour. The Panzer Corps was also handicapped by the mass of fleeing Rumanians and by the terrible weather. The prospects of a successful counter-attack diminished rapidly, while those sectors of the original front which



were still holding out found themselves in an increasingly parlous state. The crisis was becoming acute.

From the point of view of Army Group B and of the Army High Command, it was bound to get worse. We knew that Panzer Corps H would be incapable of stabilizing the situation and must, indeed, become hopelessly embroiled in the general confusion. With it gone, we would have lost our one and only reserve formation. At Army High Command the prospects looked very black indeed.

I did my utmost to explain this to Hitler. Once again I proposed the withdrawal of Sixth Army as the only possible way of avoiding a major catastrophe. That army would have had to turn about, securing its new rear by means of rear-guards, and attack the Russians which had broken through the Rumanian front. It should then have been possible to establish a firm front further to the west. This course of action would not only have parried the threat to Sixth Army but might well have put the Russians columns which had broken through in a very tricky position. We could at least expect local successes from such an operation.

Were this not done, a disaster was calculably inevitable. Sixth Army would be cut off and encircled and a great gap torn in the front held by Army Group B. Nor were there fresh forces available either to re-establish contact with Sixth Army or to plug the gap. With every day's delay it must become increasingly difficult to rectify the situation and avoid this disaster.

Hitler rejected this large and bold solution. Despite all my demands by telephone, despite my repeated descriptions of how the situation would and must develop, he remained adamant. However, he had ordered his command train turned about, and was returning from Bavaria to his headquarters in East Prussia.

### *Hitler's and Jodl's Plan*

Before the command train reached Rastenburg, General Jodl telephoned me. I was not expecting this. Hitherto I had had little to do with him. The theatres with which his staff was occupied were those in the south and west: the Eastern Front was the responsibility of the Army High Command and of the Chief of the Army General Staff. In my presence, at least, Jodl had refrained from advising Hitler on subjects relating to the Eastern Front and had confined his activities to the matters assigned to him, that is to say the other theatres (which were known as O.K.W. or Armed Forces



Supreme Command Theatres), the general conduct of the war and questions of military policy.

Now, however, it appeared that on board the command train, in the absence of the Chief of the Army General Staff, he and Field-Marshal Keitel had seen fit to advise Hitler concerning the battle in the East. Perhaps he had asked them for their advice. In any event they had given it, and it was soon apparent what sort of advice it was.

General Jodl said, on the telephone, that the Army High Command should consider whether it would not be possible to bring up one armoured division from Army Group A, in the Caucasus, to act as a reserve behind the endangered front of Army Group B. Such was the solution to the crisis as envisaged aboard Hitler's command train. Furthermore the transfer of this single armoured division to the critical area must take a long time, and there was no telling what the situation would be when at last it arrived.

I was astonished and asked that I might speak to Hitler personally. Again I asked permission to order the withdrawal of Sixth Army. His tone was icy. He said: 'We have found another expedient which Jodl will tell you about. We will talk it over tomorrow.' And that was that. Later I was officially informed that Hitler wished to see me at noon on the following day in order to discuss the situation. I replied that this would be too late. I was then told that it would not be possible for me to see Hitler any earlier, since he would be tired after his long journey. This, it should be pointed out, was at a time when the whole front was ablaze and hundreds of brave soldiers were dying with each hour that passed!

I ignored these instructions, and at midnight, when his train was expected to arrive, I was waiting at his Supreme Headquarters. I insisted that he see me at once, for time was now of vital importance and even a few hours' delay could endanger the success of the operation which must be decided on immediately. To begin with both Hitler and his entourage were furious that I should have appeared there at midnight, instead of waiting until noon on the following day. However, I was at last admitted to his presence. This meeting was so significant for the future course of operations in the Stalingrad area, and so characteristic of Hitler's methods, that I shall describe it in some detail.

He came to meet me, hand outstretched, a beaming smile on his face, deliberately radiating confidence and hope. He shook me by the hand, and said:



'I thank you. You have done all that could be done. I myself would not have been able to do more, had I been here.' Then, since I took care that my expression remain grave, he allowed a certain note of pathos to creep into his voice. He went on: 'Don't let yourself be upset. We must show firmness of character in misfortune. We must remember Frederick the Great.'

No doubt he wished to encourage me. Perhaps he hoped that if he could inspire in me this 'firmness of character' of which he spoke, I should then abandon my 'defeatist' arguments in favour of withdrawing the Sixth Army. Also he probably wished me to admire his own steadfastness in the face of misfortune. It seems that Hitler quite failed to realize that in times of extreme danger and crisis such play-acting is not only useless but can have an exactly contrary effect to the one desired.

I opened the conversation by describing the situation north-west of Stalingrad, both as it now was according to the latest reports received from the front and as it must be expected to develop in the near future. I presented the reports and estimates received from the Commander-in-Chief of Army Group B, Field-Marshal von Weichs, and from his Chief of Staff, General von Sodenstern, both of whom shared my opinions. I concluded by saying that if events continued to follow their present course, Sixth Army must inevitably be encircled. This must be avoided at all costs, since were Sixth Army to be encircled it would not be possible either to release it or to keep it supplied.

At this point Hitler interrupted me. He lost his temper and referred to the solution which he and Jodl had worked out together. This was the transfer of the single panzer division from the Caucasus. I had expected this and could now give a detailed survey of transport conditions together with the estimated date of arrival of the division in question and the earliest possible date by which it might be expected to go into action. This would be at least a fortnight hence. There was no telling what the situation would then be, but one thing was certain: it would have deteriorated catastrophically if we were to sit back and do practically nothing for two weeks. By then one division, which was not even up to strength, would be quite useless and utterly incapable of influencing the course of events. Furthermore, it was doubtful whether it would even prove possible to send it in to attack as a unit. In view of the situation, its component parts would probably have to be committed piecemeal as and when they detrained. It seemed to me that these



statements, and particularly my detailed calculations concerning the date of the division's arrival, did have some effect on Hitler.

But he would not agree to abandon this plan of his. He thought for a while, and then said: 'In that case we shall bring up two divisions from the Caucasus.' I replied that this would be no improvement. The dangerous time was now: two divisions now might make a difference. But to bring them from the Caucasus in time would not be possible. Rail communications were such that a second division could only be moved after the lines were free, that is to say after the first division had been unloaded. By that time two divisions would be no more capable of restoring the situation than one, for by then Sixth Army would certainly have been encircled.

Hitler lost his temper again and began to interrupt, but I went on:

'There is, therefore, only one possible solution. You must immediately order the Stalingrad army to turn about and attack westwards. This will save the Sixth Army from encirclement, will inflict great damage on the Russian armies that have broken through, and will enable us to use the Sixth Army in building a new front farther to the west.'

Hitler now lost all self-control. He crashed his fist down on the table, shouting:

'I won't leave the Volga! I won't go back from the Volga!'

This was the end of the conference, the basic conference from which I, the General Staff, Army Group B and Sixth Army had expected so much. Nothing whatever had been obtained. But previous experience had shown that as Chief of the General Staff I must not now give up hope, but must go on pleading any cause relentlessly, for it might yet be possible to make Hitler change his mind even at this late hour. It was true, though, that even if he did so, it might well be too late. The sands were running out, and the situation worsening from hour to hour. Such were the circumstances when I entered my office on the following morning. There I found bad news awaiting me.

### *The Prospect Darkens*

The situation at the front had deteriorated during the past few hours, just as we had foreseen, but more rapidly even than had been feared. Anxiety was growing in my staff and in those of Army Group B and of Sixth Army alike as the scale of the impending disaster grew plainer for all to see. Yet no one at any of these head-



quarters could alter the course of events. Only Hitler was able to do this, and he had furiously rejected all appeals to reason in his refusal to act.

It was possible, as I have said, that he might even now be persuaded to change his mind, that he might yet listen to the words of his Chief of the General Staff and of the senior commanders in the field rather than to those of his sycophantic advisers who merely told him what they knew he wished to hear. In the interests of the soldiers fighting desperately at the front, I had no choice but to attempt as best I could to make him see reason. This I stubbornly continued to do.

On November 20th the Russians had launched their second attack, south of Stalingrad. Here too they hit Rumanian troops, no doubt choosing their sector deliberately. They broke through, as they had done to the north-west of the city. The Stalingrad army was thus threatened with encirclement from both flanks. It was now only a question of hours before the two enemy pincers must meet in that army's rear. Neither the Army Group Commander nor the Army Commander could prevent this. All that they could do was to order that their rear echelon and supply troops be formed into combat units and prepared for action with all speed. But such troops could hardly be expected to resist the picked Russian assault divisions any more successfully than had the combat troops which the Russians had already overrun. Small, weak, *ad hoc* formations, inadequately armed and lacking in proper training, now found themselves thrown in against the élite of the Red Army which was lavishly supported by armour and artillery. Though they fought bravely and died where they stood, these rear echelon troops could not stop the break-through. They could, and perhaps did, delay the Russian advance: they could not, and did not, prevent the encirclement of the Sixth Army.

The counter-attack by Panzer Corps H was scarcely more encouraging. Hitler and his entourage apparently placed great faith in this formation, which looked impressive enough on the maps and which contained more than a hundred tanks. Appearances, however, were deceptive; they should not have deceived Hitler who had of course been fully informed of the facts, but he had again refused to face the truth about this corps on the usual grounds that the reports were 'defeatist.' The corps consisted of two divisions, the 1st Rumanian Armoured Division and the 22nd Panzer Division. The Rumanian division had never yet seen real action, and



was equipped entirely with captured tanks. The 22nd Panzer Division was below strength, many of its vehicles having broken down while marching up to the front. The weather conditions under which the corps now had to fight were atrocious: there was ice everywhere and the snow fell incessantly and formed drifts. There were only a few hours of daylight in the twenty-four. It was in these circumstances that Panzer Corps H was expected to stem a mass of Russian tanks pouring through a huge gap in our front line which was growing steadily wider. For those who knew what the true situation was, Panzer Corps H was doomed before ever it was committed.

Its counter-attack was delayed, as we had expected, both by the weather and by the enemy. At last it went into action and soon had some successes to show: the Russians were stopped at various points, and heavy losses, particularly in tanks, were inflicted on them. But this did not bring about a fundamental change in the situation, let alone restore it as Hitler had believed would be the case. So tremendous a task was quite beyond the capabilities of two weak divisions. A large force of many strong divisions, manned by veteran troops with first-class equipment, would have been required to do this.

When Hitler learned that the counter-attack by Panzer Corps H had failed, his fury knew no bounds. Turning to Field-Marshal Keitel, who was in charge of disciplinary procedure within the army, he shouted: 'Send for the corps commander at once, tear off his epaulettes, and throw him into gaol. It's all his fault.'

Such was the atmosphere around Hitler's conference table. In view of his character, it is not surprising that he furiously refused to listen when I once again attempted to secure his authorization for the withdrawal of the Sixth Army. Nor did he heed the reports from the command staffs of Army Group B and of the Sixth Army in which the commanders, fully aware of their great responsibility, attempted to draw his attention to the gravity of the situation. These reports outlined the probable future developments in the battle zone and also demanded the withdrawal of the Sixth Army. Hitler's anger merely increased his obstinacy.

Some hours later, assuming that Hitler's rage would have subsided, I asked for and obtained a private interview with him. At this interview I hoped to achieve two positive results. I thought that if I could give Hitler a coldly factual report on the actual situation and the conclusions for the future which must be drawn therefrom



—and without being interrupted while so doing by the whispered comments of his personal entourage—I might persuade him to change his mind. Secondly, I wished to show him that the charges levelled against the commander of Panzer Corps H were not justified and should be quietly dropped.

Hitler received me quite calmly and listened attentively to what I had to say. I could and did count this interview as doubly successful. When I had outlined the situation and the probable future course of events, Hitler, who had refrained from interrupting me, promised that he would reconsider his decision carefully and coolly. Then I turned to the question of the corps commander. I said:

‘Though court-martial matters are not the concern of the Chief of the General Staff, I should like to say something about the General Officer Commanding Panzer Corps H.’ Hitler’s expression hardened at once, but I went on: ‘I wish to do so because this is also an operational question in that it affects the conduct of operations upon the Eastern Front. As Chief of the General Staff I am of the opinion that a general who has made mistakes which have had disadvantageous consequences should be called to account. But before he is asked to justify his past actions, it must be established that he has, in fact, been at fault. This is not the case with the general in question: the charges levelled against him rest purely on supposition.’ I then proposed that a court of enquiry be set up to enquire into the facts of the case. Hitler should appoint as members of this court generals whom he knew personally and in whom he had full confidence. Hitler thought for a few moments before replying. Then he said: ‘All right, I’ll do that.’

Unfortunately my two successes proved ephemeral. When next I saw Hitler he said: ‘I have considered the situation carefully. My conclusions remain unaltered. The Sixth Army will not be withdrawn.’ Whether this was in fact his own decision, or whether he had been prompted to take it by Field-Marshal Keitel and General Jodl, I cannot say. But in any case he did not again ask for the opinion of the Chief of the Army General Staff.

In the matter of the corps commander, he simply broke his word to me. This was after a lengthy discussion with Keitel. His original decision, dictated by rage and frustration, was maintained. Nobody was allowed to mention the general’s name again in Hitler’s presence. The general spent several months in prison, after which he was reduced to the rank of private. There was no court of enquiry, for this would only have revealed who was really to



blame for the failure of the panzer corps' counter-attack. Early in December a decree, signed by Hitler, was distributed among the senior generals, in which were listed the alleged faults committed by the unfortunate corps commander.

### *The Russian Pincers Meet*

At the front the situation grew hourly worse. By the third day of this enormous winter battle the junction of the two Russian pincers, and with it the encirclement of the Sixth Army, was imminent. The headquarters of that army were located precisely where the two prongs of the Russian advance might be expected to meet. The army commander asked permission of Hitler to move his staff farther to the west, but obtained no answer to this request.

The daily communiqué was drawn up by the Army High Command and was usually corrected by Hitler himself. On the first day of the battle, it simply said: 'The enemy has launched an attack with strong infantry forces supported by armour.' On the third day it read: 'South-west of Stalingrad and in the great Don bend, the Soviets have succeeded in breaking into our defensive front by recklessly throwing vast masses of men and material into the battle.'

On the evening of November 22nd a wireless message was received from the commander of the Sixth Army informing the Army High Command that his army was now encircled. Hitler replied, likewise by radio. He ordered that Sixth Army form a defensive hedgehog and that the commander and his staff move to Stalingrad. Thus was the Stalingrad encirclement completed. Along the rest of the active front the Russians continued to advance without a pause.

The Russian High Command seems to have based its plans on the following considerations. According to all past experience, the German army, and the other units now encircled with it in and about Stalingrad, would be ordered to hold fast and fight where they stood. They would not be able to do this for any long period of time, after which they would automatically drop into Russian hands. Therefore the next objective of the Russian offensive must not be the elimination of the pocket but the prevention of its relief by forces coming from outside. The best way to ensure this must be to push the German front as far westward as possible, thus creating the maximum gap between the encircled army and the main German forces within the shortest possible period of time.



This plan was both obvious and correct; the Russians now set about putting it into practice. Army Group B was attacked heavily and relentlessly and was pushed farther and farther west. To enlarge the scale of their victory, they attacked the Italians during the second half of December, the Hungarians in January and finally the German Second Army on the Hungarians' left. They drove on, deep into the west. It had all turned out exactly as I had prophesied during my long interview with Hitler, when I was first appointed Chief of the Army General Staff.

### *'Fortress' Stalingrad*

One of the first orders which Hitler issued, after the two Russian pincers had met, ran as follows: 'The forces of the Sixth Army encircled at Stalingrad will be known as the troops of Fortress Stalingrad.'

Thus by a stroke of the pen an encirclement became a fortress, as least as far as Hitler was concerned. Perhaps a portion of the unsuspecting German nation was deceived by this ruse. But the military staffs, the troops and presumably the enemy knew what to think of Hitler's 'fortresses.'

This was typical of his ways of waging psychological war. By invoking the word 'fortress' he thought he had killed several birds with one stone. The enemy would be deceived into regarding Stalingrad as a fortified area with defensive works capable of stopping an assault. The German troops at Stalingrad would be encouraged to hold fast by their belief that they were now within a fortress which could withstand a long siege and save them from heavy casualties. The civilian population would be confused by historical memories of fortresses heroically defended and, later, heroically relieved. The world would thus forget the realities of the situation, which were that a German army had become encircled for no purpose as a result of incompetent planning at the highest level. For Fortress Stalingrad was a fortress in name only.

Hitler was delighted with this invention of his. When he told me of it, he was positively beaming with delight and apparently expected my enthusiastic approval. I said:

'In the old days a fortress was the product of long preparatory work. After the fortifications had been built, the fortress was stocked with large supplies of ammunition and of food. Stalingrad is neither fortified nor supplied. Furthermore, the purpose of



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fortresses is to tie down large enemy forces with relatively weak forces of one's own. This is the very opposite of the case with Sixth Army.'

But even in such a trivial matter as this question of nomenclature, Hitler would brook no criticism. My comments merely made him peevish and he adhered to his invention. The generals and soldiers within the pocket were understandably irritated by having this bombastic and meaningless title bestowed upon them. Otherwise its effect was nil.

The encirclement was, to begin with, some twenty-five miles wide (that is, the East-West axis) and about half as deep (the North-South axis). The country was steppe, with scarcely a tree or bush to be seen. It contained a number of villages as well as the greater part of Stalingrad, though sections of that city were still in Russian hands. Its eastern boundary was the right bank of the Volga. The greater part of the front was newly formed—by the Russian breakthroughs from north and south—and was completely unfortified. There fortifications had now to be built in conditions of extreme difficulty, in a raging blizzard, with the thermometer far below freezing-point and with all building materials almost non-existent. The physical strain on commanders and troops alike was enormous. In such circumstances was the hedgehog created.

The pocket contained most of twenty German divisions and elements of two Rumanian divisions. There were also G.H.Q. troops such as engineers, artillery, assault gun battalions, pioneers, units of the Todt Organization, the headquarter staffs of five army corps and General Paulus's Sixth Army headquarters. The Luftwaffe was represented by part of an Anti-Aircraft Artillery Corps and by the ground staffs. Stocks of ammunition and of food were low. The encircled troops were particularly short of fuel for the numerous mechanized units. It was obvious that such supplies as existed would soon be consumed.

It is not possible to establish the exact number of troops encircled, the figures given varying from 216,000 to something over 300,000. The reason for this discrepancy is that the highest figure is that of the ration strength of Sixth Army, and attached units, before the opening of the Russian offensive. But small elements of Sixth Army were not caught in the encirclement when first it was formed, while units belonging to other armies were. The situation during the first few weeks was so confused that it was quite impossible to give exact figures. In any case the encircled troops and their commanders



had more important tasks to fulfil than counting heads and submitting strength returns.

The only means of communication between the encircled army and the outer world were by aeroplane and radio. At first there were three or four airfields within the pocket. Soon after the encirclement a special radio-telephone link was established. In the early days it worked fairly well, and it was possible for General Paulus to carry on conversations with the Army Group Commander.

### *Should Sixth Army Fight its Way Out?*

As soon as Sixth Army was surrounded the army commander, and also the commander of the army group, attempted to obtain Hitler's authorization for the army to fight its way out of the encirclement and join the main German forces farther west. He had hitherto refused to sanction such a withdrawal, the plans for which had been based on a military appreciation of probable future developments. These developments had now materialized, and Weichs, Paulus and the latter's corps commanders assumed that Hitler would now face the facts and act accordingly. Therefore, without awaiting his reply, preliminary orders were issued so that as soon as his authorization was received, the operation might be begun without delay.

The authorization was not forthcoming. Day after day I did my utmost to persuade Hitler that Sixth Army must be allowed to break out. Almost every night he and I discussed the matter, frequently for hours on end. The tone of these conversations was sometimes factual and calm, while at others it was acrimonious and voices were raised. When he shouted at me, I now simply shouted back: it was the only way of making oneself heard when he was in one of his irritated moods.

On one occasion I thought that I had won my point. Hitler seemed prepared to sign the order authorizing the break-out. Everyone sighed with relief, and preliminary instructions were issued. But when the order was submitted to Hitler for signature he repeatedly postponed putting his name to it and at last told me that he had changed his mind. It had all been in vain: the endless discussions, arguments and quarrels had to be begun all over again. The extent of the moral strain to which the responsible senior officers were subjected can readily be imagined. Nerves had a tendency to snap. In order to show what the atmosphere at this time was like, I shall describe two particularly important talks



which I had with Hitler. At some points I can quote the actual words used.

The first took place shortly after the Russian pincers had met. I had requested a long and private interview with the dictator and my request had been granted. He received me late at night and we talked almost till morning. I began by showing Hitler the exact situation, using maps, and described probable future developments. He now interrupted me. He said the situation would not develop as I supposed, but would be radically altered by the attack of the panzer division coming from the Caucasus and by the commitment of the new heavy tank, the Tiger.

This was a new theory, and a typical one. The first Tigers were just coming from the factories. Hitler had a tendency to regard any new weapon as a miracle-worker. He believed that if the first of these heavy tanks were to be sent in as a battalion, this unit could succeed in breaking the Russian encirclement. He was all afire for his plan, which indeed seemed to intoxicate him. He probably did actually believe that the employment of this single battalion could alter the whole course of the battle overnight.

With glowing eyes and voice raised, Hitler attempted to inspire me with his own enthusiasm. He seemed to desire my approval for this plan of his. I said:

'It is quite true that the prototype Tigers have given an impressive performance and we can expect great things of them. But we do not yet know how they will stand up to Russian winter conditions, nor have they as yet been tested in battle. Hitherto all new weapons have shown unexpected deficiencies when first used in action, and the elimination of these bugs has always proved a lengthy business. We cannot therefore assume that the Tiger will be one hundred per cent satisfactory from the beginning. Besides, we haven't got enough of them. A single battalion might conceivably succeed in breaking through the Russian lines and establishing contact with the Sixth Army, but it could not possibly keep a corridor open. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that when the new tanks are committed, our main front will be considerably farther away from the Stalingrad army than it is today. The operation will, as a result of the greater distances to be covered, be even more difficult and problematical than it would be, could it be launched at once.'

So much for the Tiger tanks. I continued my appreciation, and ended with the words:



'Since the proposed operations to relieve the Sixth Army cannot succeed, it is essential that orders be issued for that army to carry out a fighting withdrawal. This must be done at once: the last possible moment has arrived.'

Hitler had grown visibly more and more angry while I spoke. He had frequently attempted to cut me short, but I had refused to let him interrupt, for I knew that this was the last chance and that I must say my say. When at last I had finished, he shouted:

'Sixth Army will stay where it is. It is the garrison of a fortress, and the duty of fortress troops is to withstand sieges. If necessary they will hold out all winter, and I shall relieve them by a spring offensive.'

This was sheer fantasy. I said:

'Stalingrad isn't a fortress. Also there is no way of keeping Sixth Army supplied.'

Hitler grew even angrier than before and shouted louder than ever:

'Reich-Marshal Goering has said that he can keep the army supplied by air.'

Now I shouted too:

'That's rubbish!'

Hitler said:

'I am *not* leaving the Volga!'

I said, loudly:

'My Führer! It would be a crime to abandon the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. It would mean the death or capture of a quarter of a million men. There would be no hope of extricating them. The loss of that great army would mean that the backbone of the Eastern front was broken.'

Hitler went very pale, but said nothing. He gave me an icy glance and pressed the buzzer on his desk. When his SS orderly officer appeared, he said:

'Fetch Field-Marshal Keitel and General Jodl.'

No further words passed between us until they arrived. They were there almost at once, and had doubtless been waiting next door. If so, they must have heard our angry voices through the thin walls of the Map Room. They can have had few illusions concerning the nature of the row.

Keitel and Jodl saluted formally. Hitler remained standing, his expression one of solemnity. He was still very pale, but outwardly at least appeared quite calm. He said:

'I have to make a very grave decision. Before doing so, I wish to hear your opinions. Should I or should I not evacuate Stalingrad? What are your views?'

Then began what might be described as a council of war, a form of procedure which Hitler had never chosen before. Keitel, standing to attention and with eyes flashing, said:

'My Führer! Do not leave the Volga!'

Jodl spoke quietly and objectively. He weighed his words, which were as follows:

'My Führer! It is indeed a very grave decision that you now must make. If we retreat from the Volga it will mean the abandonment of a great part of the gains which we have reaped, at such heavy cost, from our summer offensive. On the other hand, if we do not withdraw the Sixth Army, its situation may become serious. The proposed operations for its relief may succeed, or they may fail. Until we have seen the result of these operations, my opinion is that we should continue to hold out along the Volga.'

'Your turn,' Hitler now said to me. He obviously hoped that the words of the other two generals would have caused me to change my mind. Though Hitler made the decisions, he was always curiously eager to have the approval, if only in form, of his technical advisers. I drew myself up to attention and said, with all due formality:

'My Führer! My opinion remains unchanged. It would be a crime to leave the Sixth Army where it is. We can neither relieve it nor keep it supplied. It would simply be sacrificed, and uselessly.'

Hitler maintained his apparent calm and self-control, though inwardly he was seething with fury. He said to me:

'You observe, General, that I am not alone in my opinion. It is shared by these two officers, both of whom are senior to yourself. I shall therefore adhere to the decision which I have made.'

He bowed stiffly and we were dismissed.

The second discussion which I propose to describe in detail took place on the following night.

Despite Hitler's blunt refusal to accept my arguments, I was not prepared to give up my fight to save the Sixth Army. I knew by experience that I must now approach the problem from another angle. Hitler's decision, which appeared final and irrevocable, was based on strategic considerations. There was no point in trying, within the immediate future, to reopen the discussion on that level: he would simply have refused to listen. This did not, however,



apply to logistical questions. My reasoning was that where strategy had failed as an argument, logistics might yet succeed. I might yet bring him around to my way of thinking if I could show him, in detail, the supply situation of Sixth Army and could prove to him on the basis of firm facts and figures that it would not be possible to keep that army supplied by air. Hitler always tended to be impressed by statistics.

My operations department, the various technical staff officers concerned and the office of the Army Quartermaster-General, were all convinced that Stalingrad could not be held and that it was impossible to keep the Stalingrad army supplied by air. I ordered the material data on which these conclusions were based prepared in the form of statistical and other tables, broken down by type of supplies. I cannot now repeat from memory the exact figures which were submitted by the various staff officers concerned. The total amount of supplies needed, however, I can recall: allowing for the supplies already within the encirclement, Sixth Army required an air-lift capable of delivering some six hundred metric tons per day. The absolute minimum on which the Sixth Army could hope to survive—in circumstances of great privation, and by making use of such expedients as slaughtering and eating the army's horses—was three hundred tons. But this minimum figure had to be met every day, regardless of such external factors as weather conditions, which were unlikely to be favourable at this season. This, then, meant that to provide Sixth Army with the irreducible minimum, at least five hundred tons of supplies must be flown in on every day which permitted the aeroplanes to take off and land.

These facts were clearly marshalled in the tables of figures which my staff officers now prepared. As soon as these were ready, I once again requested a private interview with Hitler. Again he chose an hour late at night. The atmosphere was chilly when I entered his presence as a result of our argument of the day before. However, I succeeded in arousing his interest in the figures which I laid before him and he permitted me to complete the explanations necessary to understand the full meaning of the statistical data. I ended my statement with the words:

'Having examined the facts in detail, the conclusion is inescapable: it is not possible to keep the Sixth Army supplied by air.'

Hitler's manner became icy. He said:

'The Reich-Marshal has assured me that it is possible.'

I repeated that it was not. Hitler then said:

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'Very well. He shall tell you himself.'

He sent for the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe and asked:

'Goering, can you keep the Sixth Army supplied by air?'

Goering raised his right arm and said, with solemn confidence:

'My Führer! I assure you that the Luftwaffe can keep the Sixth Army supplied.'

Hitler cast a triumphant glance at me, but I simply said:

'The Luftwaffe certainly cannot.'

The Reich-Marshal scowled and said:

'You are not in a position to give an opinion on that subject.'

I turned towards Hitler and asked:

'My Führer! May I ask the Reich-Marshal a question?'

'Yes, you may.'

'Herr Reich-Marshal,' I said. 'Do you know what tonnage has to be flown in every day?'

Goering was evidently embarrassed by this, and frowned. He said:

'I don't, but my staff officers do.'

I then said:

'Allowing for all the stocks at present with Sixth Army, allowing for absolute minimum needs and for the taking of all possible emergency measures, the Sixth Army will require delivery of three hundred tons per day. But since not every day is suitable for flying, as I myself learned at the front last winter, this means that about five hundred tons will have to be carried to Sixth Army on each and every flying day if the irreducible minimum average is to be maintained.'

Goering replied:

'I can do that.'

I now lost my temper and said:

'My Führer! That is a lie.'

An icy silence descended on the three of us. Goering was white with fury. Hitler glanced from one to the other of us in apparent perplexity and surprise. At last he said to me:

'The Reich-Marshal has made his report to me, which I have no choice but to believe. I therefore abide by my original decision.'

I now said:

'I should like to make another request.'

Hitler said:

'What is that?'

I said:

'May I submit a daily report to you giving the exact tonnage of



supplies flown in to the Sixth Army during the previous twenty-four hours?’

Goering objected, saying that this was no concern of mine, but Hitler overruled him and I was granted permission to submit this daily report. And with that, the conference ended.

Once again, it had been in vain. All I had gained was the enmity of the Reich-Marshal. Incidentally, I should point out here that many staff officers and commanders of the Luftwaffe shared my opinion from the very beginning. A number of them even expressed their doubts in writing. But they could not convince their Commander-in-Chief. He simply ignored their reports and took good care that they did not reach Hitler’s desk.

### *While Waiting for Manstein’s Attack*

Thus all my attempts to save the Sixth Army had miscarried. But I had still not given up hope. Two future developments might yet induce Hitler to change his mind: the failure of the attack intended to relieve the beleaguered army and the failure of the Air Force to keep that army supplied. The best that could be hoped from the attack was that it would bring our main forces somewhat nearer to the Sixth Army and thus improve its chances of successfully breaking out. When this moment came, when the attack had failed in its primary objective of linking up with the Sixth Army, I prayed that Hitler might at last see reason. As for the air-lift, I hoped by means of my daily report to rid him of the illusions implanted in his mind by Goering and the others.

But before the circumstances would exist in which it might yet be possible to make him change his mind and abandon Stalingrad, time must pass. And time was working against the Sixth Army. In ten or fifteen days its situation would have deteriorated seriously. In particular, supplies needed for the break-out, especially fuel stocks, were rapidly diminishing. Also the main front of Army Group B was being steadily pushed back westwards, so that the distance which Sixth Army would have to cover was increasing. These were the two main problems.

Meanwhile there was nothing to do except strain every nerve to strengthen—or rather to lessen the weakening of—Sixth Army and to ensure that the relief attack was launched in the most favourable conditions as soon as possible.

Hitler was at least persuaded to re-arrange the chain of command



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along the southern sector of the Eastern Front. A new group of armies, called Army Group Don, was established between Army Groups A and B. Field-Marshal von Manstein was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Don. The advantage of this new arrangement was that it lifted some of the responsibility from the shoulders of Army Group B, which had hitherto controlled an extremely wide sector of the front. Army Group Don could now concentrate all its efforts on the forthcoming battle for the relief of the Stalingrad army and would not be deflected from this objective by the need to consider other problems. On November 27th Army Group Don assumed command of the Sixth Army, of the Fourth Panzer Army which was to carry out the relief attack, and of the Third and Fourth Rumanian Armies, which had been pushed back westwards and now held that sector of the main front which faced towards Stalingrad.

Hitler's orders to Army Group Don were a clear reflection of his views as expressed to me. Stalingrad was to be held and communications with the German forces there re-established by means of an attack. Manstein realized at once that the orders he had received could not in fact be carried out. In a very clear report, he gave his own opinion: Sixth Army should break out westwards, this operation being synchronized with his relief attack, and a new front should then be created farther to the west.

Manstein thus repeated in modified form the opinions already expressed by myself and by the commander of Army Group B. Hitler, however, remained adamant and Manstein was not given operational command powers over Sixth Army. On the other hand Hitler attempted to sweeten the pill by promising Manstein additional forces to support his relief attack, some of which were to be drawn from the Caucasus and others from the Western theatre of operations. These forces, though they would eventually be of use to Manstein, were bound to arrive too late for the operation now being mounted.

Although thwarted in his plans, Manstein did his best to carry out the orders he had received. Without going into details which are here irrelevant, it can be stated that the staff of Army Group Don did everything possible to ensure that the attack was launched in the most favourable circumstances and with minimum delay. Manstein hoped that it might begin between the 8th and 10th of December.

Meanwhile the air-lift to Stalingrad was under way. My daily



reports to Hitler gave the tonnage figures: 110 tons, 120, sometimes 140. Only very rarely did they exceed this last figure, and usually they were less, often far less, than the first. The daily minimum was not being flown in, let alone the five hundred tons promised by the Reich-Marshal. As had been foreseen, on many days no supplies arrived at all. Sixth Army's basic requirements were not being met. This was not the fault of the air crews nor of their immediate commanders, who did their uttermost. Goering had undertaken a task which was far beyond the capacity of the German Air Force.

In daily conversations with Hitler, Goering promised improvements. He alleged that the air-lift was only beginning to function: within a few days all would be working smoothly and he would surely be able to fulfil the promises he had made. Hitler accepted these excuses and indeed repeated them to others. 'The Reich-Marshal has given me his word. The Reich-Marshal is preparing a better organization. The Reich-Marshal is bringing up more planes.'

But in fact the situation was deteriorating. The main front was being steadily pushed back westwards, and this meant that the airfields from which the supplies were being flown to Stalingrad had to be shifted repeatedly. Distances grew greater and the planes had to fly across a belt of enemy-held territory which became wider with each day that passed. More and more of our planes were shot down. This, of course, should not have surprised the Supreme Command; it was inevitable and should have been taken into account when the plans for the air-lift were drawn up. I had myself pointed out that this must happen at a very early stage.

Preparations for the attack which was to relieve the Stalingrad army were at last completed. Its opening was anxiously awaited by all, and particularly by the troops of the Sixth Army. The units from the Caucasus were nearly all in position and some reinforcements had arrived from Germany. The general officer in charge was General Hoth, commander of Fourth Panzer Army. He had at his disposal three panzer divisions, more or less up to strength, a weak force of infantry to cover his flanks, and certain G.H.Q. troops which included the battalion of Tigers. Such a force was far too weak to carry out the task assigned it: above all it could not hope to deploy in the necessary depth.

The conditions under which the attack was launched were far from ideal. The jumping-off point, in the neighbourhood of Kotel-



nikovo, was some sixty miles from Stalingrad. The Russians could not help but realize that this was the most vulnerable point—indeed the only really vulnerable point—along the front. They would react accordingly, and Hoth could expect to meet strong and determined resistance. On the other hand both commanders and troops of Fourth Panzer Army realized how decisively important this attack to relieve the Stalingrad army must be. They would certainly do all in their power to make it a success, and would not shrink from any sacrifice.

### *The Attack to Relieve Sixth Army*

The attack began on December 12th and we all awaited the first reports in great suspense. To begin with all went well, and Fourth Panzer Army advanced steadily. By December 18th Hoth's troops were only a little more than forty miles from the southern perimeter of the so-called fortress. On the 19th an important river line, the Myshkova, was reached; on the 20th it was crossed. On the 21st Stalingrad was only about thirty miles away.

And there the attack ground to a halt. Its momentum was exhausted. The troops, which were inadequate in number and desperately overtired, could only be supplied with great difficulty. Courage and determination could not alone compensate for these weaknesses. The Russians, moreover, had gathered large forces opposite the line of advance of Fourth Panzer Army. Despite a flood of orders and exhortations from the Supreme Command, the advance could not be resumed. To do this, fresh forces would have had to be committed. But there were none available.

I awaited anxiously Hitler's reaction. Before the attack was launched he had invariably given the same answer when urged to authorize the break-out of Sixth Army: we must wait and see what the attack by Fourth Panzer Army would achieve. After the initial successes of the first few days he had been in high spirits. He claimed then that his decision had been fully justified, and at this time he certainly would not tolerate the possibility of a break-out by the Sixth Army. Even during these few days of apparent success, incidentally, all the commanders in the field and I continued to believe that a break-out constituted the only possible means of saving the Sixth Army from eventual annihilation.

Hitler's confidence, however, was fully restored by this temporary victory. He now spoke not only of reaching Stalingrad but of



holding the whole Volga line. He seemed to believe that it would be possible to re-establish the front as it had been before the Russians launched their great offensive. He was deaf to all objective appreciations of the situation. He could not see that so weak an attack with so vast an objective was bound to collapse if it were not greatly reinforced and its supplies firmly ensured. He could not even be induced to order the elementary precautions which should have been taken in the event of the attack failing.

When it ground to a halt thirty miles from Stalingrad, the experts all knew immediately that this was the end. Not so Hitler. He told us to wait and see: the advance, he said, would certainly be resumed. It was not. On December 23rd the attack had to be finally called off.

This was the very last moment at which the Sixth Army might still have been saved.

### *The Last Chance*

Field-Marshal von Manstein and I once again did all we could to persuade Hitler. Had the Sixth Army been given the order to break out, it would certainly have got through. The courage of desperation would have driven the soldiers on. Thus the final catastrophe would have been avoided. But the order to break out had to come from Hitler, and this he could not be persuaded to sign.

Almost every night I passed several hours in his company, attempting to make him see reason. These scenes were, in their essence, repetitions of those which I have already described, and I shall therefore refrain from going into details concerning the rows, quarrels and mutual exacerbation to which they gave rise. But I should like to mention two incidents, since they seem to me typical.

On one occasion I believed that I had brought Hitler round to my way of thinking, for he said:

‘Very well then, draft a message for Paulus asking him how far he can get if he is ordered to break out.’

I sighed with relief and, lest Hitler should change his mind, immediately drafted the signal in Hitler’s presence, which I then gave him to sign. He read it, picked up a pencil, and inserted the words: *the condition being that you continue to hold the line of the Volga*. This clearly altered the whole purpose and nature of the proposed operation. On occasions such as this I sometimes felt that I was being driven insane. In any case, the message was sent off, and Paulus’s reply came back almost at once. I forget the exact



figure he gave, but I believe it was twenty or twenty-five miles—at any rate, a shorter distance than that which separated him from Hoth's vanguards. At the next day's conference, which was attended by a large group of officers, Hitler said:

'I have sent a radio message to Paulus asking him how far he could get, if ordered to break out. He has replied, saying that his troops could advance only twenty or twenty-five miles. So there is no purpose in ordering such an operation.'

I retorted:

'But, my Führer, you inserted the condition that he must continue to hold the Volga.'

He went pale with anger and did not reply.

On the following evening I requested a private interview. I begged him to authorize the break-out. I pointed out that this was absolutely our last chance to save the two hundred thousand men of Paulus's army. Hitler said:

'Can you guarantee that they will all be able to escape, with all their weapons?'

I replied:

'No one could guarantee that. But I can promise you that they will be all annihilated, and all their weapons lost, unless the order to break out is given at once.'

Hitler would not give way. In vain did I describe to him conditions inside the so-called fortress: the despair of the starving soldiers, their loss of confidence in the Supreme Command, the wounded expiring for lack of proper attention while thousands froze to death. He remained as impervious to arguments of this sort as to those others which I had advanced.

Since my words failed to move him, I hoped to make him see with his own eyes what was happening in the Stalingrad pocket. I proposed that I fly with him to the headquarters of Army Group Don, so that he might at least see what conditions at the front were like. He rejected this proposal. I then suggested that a selected group of officers be flown out of Stalingrad to describe conditions to him from their first-hand knowledge. He turned this suggestion down too; and indeed it was clear that he preferred not to know exactly what was happening inside the pocket. I then took matters into my own hands and sent a message to headquarters, Sixth Army, asking that General Hube be flown out. Hube was a general for whom Hitler cherished a particularly high esteem. There was therefore at least a chance that Hitler might listen to what he had to say.



I saw Hube just before he was received by Hitler. He asked me whether he might tell the Supreme Commander the truth. He had, it appeared, heard the rumour then current that Hitler could not be told the facts. I assured him that this was not so. If one told him the truth, one ran the risk of incurring his anger and falling in disgrace, a risk which a number of persons could not face. I now told Hube that he was not only permitted to tell Hitler the truth, but that it was his duty to do so.

When General Hube went in to see Hitler, the dictator began, as was his custom, by attempting to win his visitor over to his side. He said that he was aware of the very difficult circumstances that prevailed within the fortress, and that the air-lift was not yet fully effective. However, he went on, he had taken the necessary measures and there would soon be a marked improvement. Hitler talked for some time, attempting in this way to hamstring whatever arguments Hube might produce. When at last Hube was allowed to speak, he described the situation factually, clearly and gravely. It is no exaggeration to say that he was pleading for the life of the Stalingrad army.

Hitler remained unmoved. When Hube realized that his graphic descriptions were having no effect upon the dictator, he grew more and more heated. Hube was an outspoken man, and at last he said:

'The air-lift has failed. Somebody must be to blame. My Führer, why don't you execute one of the Luftwaffe generals? Up to now only Army generals have been shot for their mistakes. It's high time the Air Force was given a dose of the same medicine.'

This remark was too much for Hitler. (Later I heard him remark to Goering: 'He asked me why I didn't kill a Luftwaffe general. That's the sort of thing I have to put up with.') He put an end to the conversation, remarking:

'I have precise information about the fortress and its troubles. Indeed, nobody could plead more forcefully for the Stalingrad army than my own Chief of Staff.'

Thus Hube's visit achieved nothing, save a reiteration of the usual vain assurances. Its only result was that a special Air Force staff, under Field-Marshal Milch, was set up to co-ordinate and control the Stalingrad air-lift, but this made very little difference. The new measures not only came too late, it was quite beyond the powers of the German Air Force to keep an entire army supplied in winter, as many Luftwaffe officers had indeed predicted.



## *The Situation in Late December*

Thus did 1942 draw towards its close. The armed forces communiqué spoke of strong attacks by our forces in the Stalingrad area, whereas in fact the situation had grown increasingly unfavourable to us. Army Group Don was unable to resist Russian pressure and its front was forced back. Fourth Panzer Army could not retain the positions it had reached on December 21st and the distance between its foremost troops and the outposts of the Sixth Army was increased once again to over sixty miles. Far away to the northwest the Russians extended their winter offensive. They attacked and defeated the Italian army, which held the sector between the Rumanians and the Hungarians. The Hungarians, too, were now in peril. These developments served to increase the desperate plight of the main front, farther south.

In the fortress the situation also deteriorated, though the Russians did not, as yet, undertake any major direct assaults. The airlift was utterly inadequate and shortages soon became more and more acute. The troops' rations were cut and cut again. They were now insufficient to keep the men alive for any length of time, yet it was obvious that a further reduction must soon be inevitable. The failure of the attack by Fourth Panzer Army had demoralized both the commanders and the troops within the pocket, all the more so since they had been encouraged to hope and believe that delivery was on the way. Conditions within the encirclement are indescribable, at least by one who was not there: only a few of those who were there have survived to tell the tale.

I saw to it that Hitler was kept fully informed, that nothing was glossed over and no detail spared him. He seemed quite unmoved by the mounting tragedy. Outwardly he stuck to his original opinion, maintaining that his decision to hold Stalingrad had been the correct one in the circumstances. The reasons he now advanced to justify himself were these. By holding Stalingrad, Sixth Army was keeping large Russian formations pinned down. The enemy was thus prevented from carrying out large-scale operations elsewhere, and we were enabled to create a new and stable front line. My answer to these arguments was as follows:

'If the Russians conduct their operations correctly—and we must assume that they will do so—they will leave the minimum number of divisions to encircle the Stalingrad army. They won't attack the fortress at all in the immediate future, but will continue to drive on



westwards with the mass of their forces. Our soldiers at Stalingrad will thus be compelled to accept their destiny without even fighting a battle. They will simply fall into the enemy's hand like ripe fruit.'

These predictions were to be proved correct. But Hitler chose to go on encouraging the encircled troops even after the attack by Fourth Panzer Army had failed. He sent them a New Year message in which he said: 'You have my word that everything will be done to deliver you.' This message was drafted by Hitler personally and his Chief Adjutant brought it to me for forwarding to Sixth Army. This I refused to do, for I was not willing to send on a message which was obviously untrue. The Chief Adjutant said that Hitler had expressly ordered the despatch of the message and that he would have to report my refusal to do so. However, I would not give way, and eventually the message was sent to Stalingrad through other channels. Incidentally Hitler never called me to account or otherwise referred to this incident.

From about the middle of December a second disaster was building up, similar to that of Stalingrad. Since it was closely connected with Stalingrad I shall refer to it briefly. It was connected with the ultimate fate of the German forces in the Caucasus. At this southernmost end of the Eastern Front, our summer offensive had long ago come to a full stop. For a while local attacks had continued, but finally the German command had been compelled to go over to the defensive everywhere in this sector. Now the success of the Russian winter offensive west and south of Stalingrad was beginning to threaten the entire Caucasus position. Early in December I had drawn Hitler's attention to the mounting danger here, but he had refused to draw the obvious conclusions from the developing situation. Further Russian advances west of Stalingrad in December and, above all, the failure and finally the repulse of Fourth Panzer Army greatly increased the peril to Army Group A in the Caucasus.

One needed only to glance at the map in order to see that if the Russians continued to advance they would soon reach the Rostov area, and that if they captured Rostov the whole of Army Group A would be in imminent danger of encirclement. Precautionary measures had to be taken. I therefore arranged with the headquarters of Army Group A that a most detailed plan be prepared for the eventual withdrawal of its two armies, the Seventeenth and the First Panzer. This was done without Hitler's knowledge: had it come to his attention, it might well have cost me my head. My



purpose was to ensure that when the order to withdraw was given it could be carried out immediately. Though many factors were problematical at that time, there was one which was not. This was that if Hitler were ever to order the withdrawal of Army Group A, he would do so only at the very last possible moment. Every minute would then count and the slightest delay, while plans were being worked out, might seal the fate of the Caucasus Army Group.

As soon as the attempt to relieve Stalingrad had failed, I made a second attempt to secure Hitler's authorization for an evacuation of the Caucasus. He refused to listen then or on the many other occasions during the next few days when I referred to this pressing matter. Finally, towards the end of December, he appeared to give way. I was alone with him. I had described the situation in the south, and I ended with the words:

'Unless you order a withdrawal from the Caucasus now, we shall soon have a second Stalingrad on our hands.'

This seemed to impress Hitler, and I thought he was about to waver. I knew that I must exploit the moment to the full. I did so, and wrung a grudging approval from him. 'Very well,' he said at last, 'go ahead and issue the orders.' I left the room at once, but I did not go far. I telephoned from Hitler's own anteroom, where I gave the order for the withdrawal with an additional stipulation that it be passed on to the troops immediately and that the retirement was to be begun at once. My reason for so doing was a perfectly conscious one, and it was soon justified. I drove back to my own headquarters, which took rather less than half an hour, to find one of my staff officers waiting for me. An urgent telephone message had come in: I was to ring Hitler at once. Fully aware of what lay ahead, I picked up my telephone and asked for the connection. Hitler said:

'Don't do anything just yet about the withdrawal from the Caucasus. We'll discuss it again tomorrow.'

This would, of course, have meant the first of an endless chain of postponements until once again it would all have been too late. As it was, I was able to say:

'My Führer, it is too late. I despatched the order from your headquarters. It has already reached the front line troops and the withdrawal has begun. If the order is cancelled now, the confusion will be terrible. I must ask you to avoid that.'

He hesitated before saying:

'Very well then, we'll leave it at that.'



Thus I succeeded in saving the First Panzer Army and the Seventeenth Army from the fate that had befallen the Sixth Army. Subsequent events were to prove that this was in fact the last possible moment at which a successful withdrawal from the Caucasus could have been initiated. So here, at least, my efforts had not been in vain.

### *The Russians Demand the Surrender of Stalingrad*

If I were asked to give the date which marked the beginning of the end for General Paulus's Sixth Army, I should say January 8th, 1943. This was the date on which the Russians sent an emissary into the 'fortress' and formally demanded its surrender. Of course from another point of view the fate of the Sixth Army was sealed as soon as it was encircled and forbidden to break out: everyone in a position to judge the facts knew this, save only Hitler who was blinded by his own obstinacy. The German people, on the other hand, were not informed of the true situation, for the High Command concealed the inevitable fate of the Sixth Army from them until just before the end. I shall have more to say about this later.

The Russians began to attack the perimeter of the 'fortress' during the first days of January. The Russian High Command probably believed that Army Group Don had been pushed back far enough and that it could now eliminate the Stalingrad pocket without fear of intervention by other German forces. Why the Russians decided to launch their attack then, instead of simply waiting for the pocket to collapse of its own and without casualties to themselves, is known only to the Russian generals. They were probably influenced by three considerations. First, their future operations would be seriously impeded until such time as they controlled the important communications centre which Stalingrad constituted. Secondly, they may have realized that our voluntary withdrawal from the Caucasus ruled out the possibility of cutting off and encircling Army Group A. Thirdly, their Intelligence must have told them that supplies within the pocket were almost exhausted and that the end was near. This last seems the most probable explanation. In any event, the Russian High Command decided that the time had now come to liquidate the Sixth Army. But before launching an all-out assault, they attempted to secure the capitulation of that army without further bloodshed.

On January 8th their emissaries entered the 'fortress,' bringing with them a demand for surrender addressed to General Paulus



and signed by the Russian general commanding the Don Front. It was a long document. In it the Russian commander-in-chief described the hopeless position of the encircled Sixth Army and promised that if the soldiers surrendered they would be guaranteed life, security and their return to Germany, or whatever other country they came from, once the war was over. The document ended with the threat that if the army did not now capitulate, it would be annihilated. In the event of this offer being refused, the general officer commanding the Sixth Army would have to bear the entire responsibility for future events. A time limit was fixed for the reply: 10.00 hours, January 9th, 1943.

Paulus got in touch with Hitler at once and asked for freedom of action. This request was immediately and curtly refused. It is difficult to establish what was Hitler's state of mind at this time: nevertheless, I shall attempt to describe it, as I saw it.

He was being, as usual, extremely disingenuous. Outwardly he appeared confident and indeed certain that the Stalingrad battle would end favourably. His true thoughts he kept to himself. Only those who knew him intimately and were constantly in his company, observing him in all his varying moods, could guess at his true feelings, for very occasionally he would give himself away by some incautious phrase. Yet in his New Year message to the Stalingrad army he still promised them that they would be relieved and delivered from the hands of the enemy. The rest of the armed forces, and the German people too, were told over and over again that the tenacity and fortitude of the Stalingrad army had been essential in preserving other fronts intact and that this was still so. Their valiant defence, he said, would yet be crowned with victory. He even maintained this point of view when talking to me or to Field-Marshal von Manstein, the commander of Army Group Don. However, he probably admitted to General Jodl, his most intimate military confidant, that he no longer believed in the possibility of saving the Sixth Army.

For General Jodl, when on trial at Nuremberg, said:

'I feel great compassion for General Paulus. He could not know that Hitler considered his army lost from the moment when the first winter storms began to blow about Stalingrad.'

These blatant propaganda reasons for holding Stalingrad probably did not represent the essence of Hitler's thought. Far more was he the prisoner of his own stubborn conviction that where the German soldier once sets his foot, there he remains.



'I am not leaving the Volga!' he said again and again. 'When fighting against the Russians there can be no question of surrender.' Furthermore, from the very beginning he had acted directly against the advice of the responsible army group commanders and of myself: now he would not admit that he had made a mistake. This was certainly the true basis of his present attitude, but of course he was far too clever to reveal this to his soldiers or to the German people, and he made use of the cloak of propaganda to obfuscate the issue.

Hitler probably concealed his true feelings from everyone, even those who were closest to him. Did he feel remorse? Did he realize the magnitude of the disaster for which he was responsible? Did he pity the hundreds of thousands of soldiers whom he had arbitrarily condemned to death or Russian captivity? Did he suffer the pangs of self-reproach? I think that the answer to these questions must be in the negative. He lacked the type of imagination which enables a man to share the sufferings of others. Though he repeated, *ad nauseam*, that he had himself fought in the trenches during the First World War and that he was therefore able to feel for the soldiers at the front in the Second, he had no compassion for them. He repeatedly referred to the 'sleepless nights' which he said he had passed. Such remarks were typical of his dishonest desire to impress outsiders.

This explains why he now brutally rejected the requests by the Army Group commander and myself that he give General Paulus freedom of action. His only reply to our demands, which we repeated, was a rough and uncompromising, 'No!' Being aware of his stubborn pride, we attempted to sweeten the pill. We did not ask him to order or even authorize the capitulation himself: that would have been too much for him. All that was asked was that he grant Paulus freedom to act as he saw fit. Paulus could then surrender on his own authority. But we did not even succeed in wringing this concession from the dictator. Thus the time-limit set by the Russians expired and their offer to accept the capitulation without further bloodshed was rejected. The grave consequences of this were to have deep and long-lasting repercussions.

### *The Russian Assault*

Early on the morning of January 10th the Russian artillery laid down the heavy barrage which preceded their major attack on the 'fortress.' Two hours later their infantry began the assault against



its northern, western and southern flanks. This was the moment which the defenders, short of ammunition, had long dreaded. Fierce fighting raged throughout the whole day. The defence was heroic, many Russian tanks were knocked out, and our soldiers took a heavy toll of the Russian assault troops.

Our casualties were also severe. On the evening of this first day Sixth Army reported by radio that the Russians had broken through in the north, west and south; nor could the army close the breaches thus made. Large sections of the defensive front had to be abandoned with or without the authorization of Sixth Army headquarters. The pocket was being steadily constricted. This continued throughout the next few days. The area still held by the Germans grew narrower and narrower, while the sufferings of the troops increased.

By January 16th the pocket was some fifteen miles long, at its longest point, and some nine miles deep at its widest. That is to say, it was now about half as long and half as wide as it had been before the Russian assault began. The most serious loss was that of the Pitomnik airfield through which the 'fortress' had previously been supplied.

Now even Hitler's alleged optimism was damped. By his order the communiqués of the German High Command spoke for the first time of the serious situation which was developing. The communiqué of January 10th had referred only to local actions by fighting patrols. On January 16th there was a description of a 'defensive battle against enemy forces attacking from all sides.' Nevertheless Hitler still refused to give Paulus that freedom of action which the Army Group commander had repeatedly requested and which I too had continued to demand in the conversations that I had with the dictator. His reply was a monotonous reiteration of what was now his favourite thesis: 'Every day that the Sixth Army continues to hold out is a tremendous help to the rest of the Eastern Front. The Sixth Army is keeping strong Russian forces engaged and is inflicting heavy casualties on them.'

But at Stalingrad the tragedy was drawing to its close. For the ordinary soldier fighting there, each day simply brought a renewed dose of hunger, need, privation, hardship of every sort, bitter cold, loneliness of soul, hopelessness, fear of freezing or starving to death, fear of suffering wounds which in such circumstances could not be tended. According to each man's temperament, he was courageous, despairing or simply apathetic. But no matter what his feelings, he



had no choice save to fight on, without rest, without pause, aware that the horrible conditions in which he lived could only grow more horrible—if he were to go on living. It was a nightmare without end.

For officers of the junior and middle ranks, conditions were the same as for their troops, with the added burden of responsibility for the lives of the men entrusted to them, of being unable to help their men, of knowing the hopelessness of attempting to carry out the orders they received with starving troops and insufficient ammunition. And all that, with the end a foregone conclusion.

Superficially conditions for the senior commanders and their staff officers were sometimes rather better. But in exchange they had to bear the pressure of greater responsibility. They could cherish no illusions concerning the hopelessness of it all. Sooner or later, according to rank and temperament, they realized the senselessness of the orders which they had received from Hitler and the deceitful nature of the promises which he had made them. The bitter end which awaited those officers and the soldiers under their command was for them a mathematical certainty. Each order which they received entailed for them an emotional struggle: should they carry it out or not? They had to pass on orders which they themselves considered erroneous. Moreover, they had to assume a pretence of courage and confidence in the eyes of their subordinates.

Supplies to the fighting troops had ceased almost completely. The soldiers lacked food, ammunition, fuel, equipment of every sort. If something were lost, it was gone forever and could never be replaced. Shortages became more stringent with each passing day. Many artillery units fired off their last shells and then destroyed their guns. Truck drivers, when their petrol tanks were empty, set fire to their vehicles. Whole formations melted away. The Sixth Army was consumed as by a fire until all that was left was slag.

There was no shelter for the wounded, no bedding, no food, no medicaments, not even any bandages. Doctors and surgeons were powerless, for they had nothing to work with. Day after day this situation went on, growing worse all the time. Only one question now remained: how much longer could the battle continue?

Between January 16th and January 24th the pocket was split in two, the two parts being only in contact by wireless. The last emergency landing grounds were lost. On January 23rd or 24th the last plane took off from the pocket and flew off westwards. The remnants of Sixth Army were thenceforward completely severed



from the outside world. It is not hard to imagine what this meant to the encircled troops. All hope had now gone and the atmosphere was one of grim despair. Supplies were dropped into the split pocket. These were not large in quantity and much fell into the enemy's lines. Material which dropped into the small areas still held by the Germans could sometimes not be found in the deep snowdrifts.

On January 24th Russian truce emissaries reappeared. They hoped—indeed they may well have assumed—that the Germans would surrender now. General Paulus decided that he would ask Hitler once again for permission to capitulate. He did so on this same day, by radio. He explained frankly why the position was now untenable. He said that a centralized command was no longer possible: the front had been broken up and there were signs of dissolution everywhere: the troops lacked food and ammunition, while there were neither bandages nor drugs for the wounded. He ended by saying that further resistance was senseless, since the collapse of the forces under his command was inevitable. He asked Hitler to authorize an immediate capitulation so that at least the remaining lives might be spared.

Field-Marshal von Manstein and I supported this demand, he in writing and I verbally. It was, indeed, only a repetition of the demand that we had been making for the past two weeks.

Hitler remained adamant. Neither the commander of the Army Group nor I could move him an inch. The unvarnished facts in Paulus's report affected him not at all. The figures of dead and wounded, the state of the food and ammunition supplies, left him totally unmoved. Even the dramatic descriptions by eye-witnesses of the hell that was raging near Stalingrad, that was becoming more atrocious every day, left him quite cold. Nothing could convince him or make him change his point of view. He simply repeated that each day's resistance by the Sixth Army brought great benefits to the rest of the Eastern Front.

He sent his reply to General Paulus's request without any delay. He forbade capitulation and ordered Sixth Army to go fighting on to the last man and the last round. Paulus therefore rejected the second Russian truce offer.

A little later Hitler despatched a second message to the Sixth Army in which lofty phrases concerning 'heroic defence' and 'saving the Western World' were liberally employed. And that was all. Outside the pocket life, and the war, went on.



## The End

To the north and west of the pocket the Russians had widened the front of their winter offensive. The Hungarian Army, on the left of the Italians, was attacked and defeated. Farther north still, the German Second Army now suffered the same fate. In the south the situation remained critical, the only ray of hope being the timely withdrawal of our forces from the Caucasus. This operation, though carried out at the last possible moment, was fully successful and the decision to order the retreat completely justified. The divisions thus freed were available for operations elsewhere. Hitler's Supreme H.Q. was not only worried about events on the Eastern Front. In Africa the British had captured Tripoli, and Rommel's army was in grave peril.

The Reich-Marshal made a number of speeches at this time in which he spoke of the heroic battle being fought beside the Volga. He does not seem to have realized that apart from Hitler he was the person principally to blame for the Stalingrad tragedy. He appeared to have forgotten his solemn promise to keep the Sixth Army supplied by air. Now he proceeded to celebrate his birthday in his usual lavish and extravagant fashion. This was at a time when I, together with my staff officers, had cut our rations to the level of those being issued to Paulus's troops. I did this as a small gesture of comradeship.

The German people, in an atmosphere of growing, horrified tension, now became aware of the catastrophe that was building up in the East. The High Command communiqués carefully prepared them for the bad news to come. The official propaganda organs attempted to conceal the scope and nature of the disaster beneath descriptions of the heroic battle that Sixth Army was fighting.

In the pocket the end was drawing near, quickly and relentlessly. One divisional commander refused to obey his superior's orders and, with the purpose of saving the handful of men still under his command, carried out an individual surrender to the Russians. A Rumanian unit deserted *en masse* to the enemy, with all their weapons and their entire equipment. Senior commanders who could no longer endure the strain either committed suicide or stood in the front line, firing at the advancing Russians, until at last an enemy bullet put an end to their agony. A few junior officers and men asked their superiors for permission to attempt to penetrate the Russian lines and reach the main German front. Many set off



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on this perilous trek, and in March a solitary sergeant reached the German lines after weeks of incredible hardship. He did not long survive the effects of the privations he had suffered. Within the pocket many men were dying of hunger and of cold.

The split pocket grew steadily smaller. Then one of the halves was itself cut in two, so that there were now actually three distinct bodies of encircled German troops: that in the north under command of the XIth Army Corps, that in the centre under the LIst Panzer Corps, and that in the south under General Paulus himself. This of course made the defence even more difficult than before, facilitated the task of the attacking Russians, and hastened the end. All this was reported by General Paulus on January 28th. He added that Sixth Army headquarters expected the final collapse to come on February 1st.

Even now Hitler bluntly refused to listen to Field-Marshal von Manstein or to myself when we once again demanded freedom of action for General Paulus. Instead he sent a long message by wireless to the Sixth Army, filled with sonorous phrases concerning 'heroic struggles' and 'entering indelibly into the pages of history.' Hitler ordered a flood of decorations and promotions for the freezing, starving, dying soldiery. He hoped that this would stimulate the men to fight on. General Paulus was promoted Field-Marshal. That was the sum-total of Hitler's contribution to the Battle of Stalingrad in its final hour.

Hints were given to the German people that the end was approaching. In its communiqué of January 27th the High Command referred to 'those elements of the Sixth Army which are still capable of fighting.' Even civilians totally unversed in military matters could see the implications of phrases such as that. The official propagandists continued, according to instructions received, to stress only the heroic aspects of the battle that was being lost.

The Reich-Marshal led the way. He sent special messages by radio to the Sixth Army, and the soldiers, fully aware that he had failed them, were in consequence all the more embittered against him. In a speech on January 30th he spoke of 'the greatest and most heroic fight in all the annals of the German race' and compared the Stalingrad soldiers to those Greek heroes who had fought to the last man at Thermopylae. Did it not occur to him that by drawing such a comparison he was writing off the men of the Sixth Army as though they were already dead? A great number of troops in the pocket heard his words and drew this conclusion. And they knew



that the person who uttered them was the same man who, as Commander-in-Chief of the German Air Force, had said that the Sixth Army could be supplied by air and had solemnly sworn that he would do so.

The last days at Stalingrad took the course that Field-Marshal Paulus had forecast in his report of January 28th. On January 31st the Field-Marshal sent a radio message to the Army High Command in which he stated that the final collapse could be expected to take place within the next twenty-four hours. That same day the central pocket surrendered, the surviving officers and men being taken prisoner. Early on February 2nd the northern pocket capitulated, and about noon on that day the southern pocket gave in. Each pocket announced the approaching end over the air. In each case the final radio message ended with the words: 'Long live Germany!'

### *Conclusion*

The soldiers of the Sixth Army had done their duty to the end, despite the senseless orders which they had received and even despite the fact that many if not most of them were fully aware just how senseless those orders were. Theirs had been a truly terrible battle. Weak from hunger, half frozen, without hope, almost without ammunition or supplies, they had yet caused the Russian commanders and troops great difficulties and had inflicted very heavy casualties on the enemy. They had held out against vastly superior forces enjoying an equally vast superiority in arms and equipment from January 10th to February 2nd, that is to say for more than three whole weeks. This feat alone is impressive enough. When one remembers the physical, psychological and climatic conditions in which they fought, their achievement must be evaluated doubly or even trebly high. Words are inadequate to describe the devotion to duty shown by those men. In years to come, when the partisan emotions of today have faded, this fact will be remembered. History will pay the tribute due to those soldiers who thought only of their duty and who accomplished it to the last.

Our verdict on those men must not be affected by the fact that this was a battle which should never have been fought and that the world has already condemned the man who gave the order despite all the remonstrances of his senior military advisers. Let us see how he reacted to the catastrophe.

When he learned that it was all over, he was furious and raged



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against the newly appointed Field-Marshal who had preferred captivity to death. He said that he had not expected this; had he done so, he would never have promoted Paulus. This was his only reaction, or at least the only one which he revealed to the officers about him.

He gave no sign that he regretted his past obstinacy, nor that he felt any need to reproach himself for what had happened. He still produced the same arguments which he had laid down as the official line of propaganda: it had been necessary that Sixth Army sacrifice itself in order that a new front might be built. Bad weather, that is to say circumstances beyond his control, had stopped the air force from keeping the army supplied. He was a man possessed of a remarkable memory, yet he had conveniently forgotten that I myself had warned him of probable bad weather on the basis of my own experiences at the front during the previous winter. Hitler never once admitted that he himself was to blame or that he might have made a faulty appreciation of the situation. To listen to him, he was always and invariably right. If his plans miscarried, it was always due either to unpredictable and incalculable factors beyond his control or to the inefficiency or worse of those charged with the execution of the orders he had signed.

He seemed utterly unaffected by the bloody tragedy of Stalingrad, by the cruel sufferings of hundreds of thousands of his soldiers or by the misery inflicted upon their unknown families. He seemed to shake it all from him, and was soon planning enthusiastically for the future. 'We shall create the Sixth Army anew,' he said. This was his solution. But though new units might be labelled 'Sixth Army,' the Sixth Army could of course never be re-created. It had died at Stalingrad. With it had died a large part of the confidence which the German Army had hitherto felt in its Supreme Commander; or, to be more exact, he had killed it by his own obstinacy.

In November I had told Hitler that if a quarter of a million soldiers were to be lost at Stalingrad, then the backbone of the entire Eastern Front would be broken. I was to be proved right, for the Battle of Stalingrad was the turning-point of the entire war.

This was cold comfort indeed, in view of the tragedy that had occurred. For months on end I had struggled to make Hitler see reason and reach the correct decisions. I had failed. I therefore drew certain conclusions regarding my own position as Chief of the General Staff. I went to see Hitler and demanded my dismissal. He was furious, and replied roughly: 'A general is not entitled to abandon his post.'



# BETWEEN THE ACTS

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

THE disaster at Stalingrad profoundly shocked the German people and armed forces alike: indeed, it may be said to have horrified them. Never before in Germany's history had so large a body of troops come to so dreadful an end. But the bitter day-to-day struggle, which is the nature of modern war, does not allow much time for consideration of what is past. Nevertheless doubts concerning the ability of our political and military leaders were now being openly expressed.

1943, which had begun so tragically, was to produce further deadly surprises. It is true that the Eastern Front could be stabilized, despite the loss of an Italian army, a Hungarian army and a Rumanian army in addition to the German Sixth, and a Russian break-through on a strategically decisive scale was avoided. It even proved possible, in March of 1943, to recapture Kharkov from the Soviets by means of a brilliantly executed operation carried out by Field-Marshal von Manstein. But the gap torn in the ranks of the German Army when the twenty divisions of the Sixth Army, almost all formations of a very high class, were annihilated, could never be made good, even though all the divisions lost at Stalingrad were re-formed.

Scarcely had the Eastern Front been more or less stabilized, when the drama in the south began to approach its climax. In January Rommel had evacuated Tripoli and had been compelled to withdraw into the Mareth Line along the Libyan-Tunisian border. Thus Italy had lost its entire colonial empire, that nation's proudest possession. In February the old Desert Fox launched his last attack, with a limited objective. He moved quickly across southern Tunisia and hit the American forces, which he took by surprise as they advanced from eastern Algeria, and he succeeded in delaying them. But then, under superior pressure from the British Eighth Army, he was forced to evacuate the Mareth position and withdraw to the north. Now Rommel's and Arnim's armies joined hands in central Tunisia and formed together the new Army Group Africa. But Rommel was soon ordered to give up this command, since Hitler did not wish to see another German Field-Marshal follow Paulus into captivity. After further bitter fighting the combined British and American forces under General Alexander succeeded in May in dealing the final, mortal blow to the

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German-Italian armies in Africa. In mid-May the Axis troops capitulated. All Africa was now in Allied hands and the Sicilian narrows were once again open to Allied ships plying between Gibraltar and Suez.

The news of the collapse in Tunisia, which resulted in the capture of more than 150,000 German and Italian prisoners of war, affected Italian public opinion like a thunderbolt. Mussolini's government tottered. Italy, hitherto subject only to aerial bombardment, was about to become a theatre of war. In the course of the summer seven German divisions moved down into the peninsula, to bolster our ally. Although the military necessity for it was apparent to the Italians, for internal political reasons Mussolini only reluctantly accepted this support. Incidentally, the absence of these divisions was painfully felt on the Eastern Front.

At about this time the course of the war at sea, which had hitherto gone definitely in our favour, was decisively altered by the introduction of radar. U-boat losses rose alarmingly, while the tonnage of Allied shipping sunk decreased with equal rapidity.

The Allied air offensive against industry and communications, and particularly against the German cities, steadily increased both in the weight and in the frequency of the raids. Civilian casualties were heavy. The great attack on Hamburg, on July 26th, 1943, alone cost 55,000 civilians their lives. Our fighters and anti-aircraft gunners shot down many enemy bombers, but not enough to dam the torrent.

In the East the Army High Command regarded it as essential that a period of quiet be ensured so that the sorely tried infantry and panzer divisions might be thoroughly overhauled. Hitler, on the other hand, believed that this was no time to pause. After the defeats of Stalingrad and Tunisia he was determined to win fresh victories. He therefore decided to launch an offensive against the great Russian salient which was thrust forward almost sixty miles west of Kursk. The Russian forces within this salient were to be cut off by a pincer movement of Army Groups Centre and South.

On July 5th, 1943, Operation *Citadel* began with an attack by Army Group Centre in the Orel area and one by Army Group South near Belgorod. In all, nineteen panzer or panzer-grenadier and sixteen infantry divisions attacked. The northern pincer soon came up against a Russian defensive system constructed in depth. Attempts by infantry and engineer units to clear a way for the tanks failed, at great cost in men and material. The southern army group was more successful to begin with, but by mid-July the whole operation had to be broken off.



Tank losses in the 'Belgorod mincer' were particularly worrying. The German armoured force never recovered from the blood-letting it suffered here. The Soviet Marshal Koniev described this battle as the swan-song of the German panzer divisions.

At approximately the same time, the strategic plans of the Allies in the Mediterranean theatre were revealed. During the night of July 9th-10th Allied parachutists landed in the southern part of Sicily. The invasion of Europe from the south had begun. This vanguard was followed by a fleet of approximately two and a half thousand vessels, including warships, landing craft and troop transports. The greater part of the divisions which comprised the Italian Sixth Army proved incapable of standing up to the British-American assault, and in particular to the massive aerial bombardment and the shells of the heavy naval guns. The two German divisions stationed in Sicily when the invasion began could not defeat the landings on their own, all the more so since one of them was located in the western portion of the island, where there was no fighting in the opening phase of the operation. A third German division was moved across the Straits of Messina to the Catanian plain, and a fourth was dropped by parachute. These four divisions were formed into one corps, but were too late drastically to affect the course of events. They fought hard in the Mount Etna area, but finally had to be withdrawn to the mainland. By August 17th they were back in Italy, together with all their weapons and equipment.

Mussolini's régime was incapable of surviving this fresh proof of ineptitude in his conduct of the war. On July 25th, at a stormy session of the Fascist Grand Council, the Fascist leader found himself deserted even by his own followers; he was arrested on the orders of the King; Fascism collapsed overnight like a house of cards; and Marshal Badoglio, who had been cast for the role of scapegoat by Mussolini in 1941 at the time of the Albanian and African disasters, formed a new government. Hitler realized at once that the primary aim of the Badoglio government would be to make a speedy peace, and in consequence he acted very quickly indeed. On July 26th a new German army group, consisting of eight divisions under command of Field-Marshal Rommel, began to move into Northern Italy, from France, the Tyrol and Carinthia. Its task was to prevent, if need be, the loss of that territory. Thus there were now two independent German Commanders-in-Chief in Italy, Rommel in the north and Kesselring in the south. This was to affect future operations in the peninsula.

Despite Italian protestations that they intended to fight on to final victory, the month of August passed in an atmosphere of great tension.



The Germans and Italians faced one another with guns in their hands and distrust in their hearts. Only a few hours after the Italian Minister of Marine had sworn unconditional loyalty to Field-Marshal Kesselring and the German alliance, the Italian wireless announced the capitulation and the Italian Navy set sail for Malta and internment. At the same time the Fifth United States Army landed in the Bay of Salerno. There they encountered a German panzer division; two further German divisions were tied up in the Rome area, one was in Apulia, while the other German divisions in southern Italy, hastening towards the battlefield, were held up by the many demolished bridges and by the chronic fuel shortage, so that they did not succeed in intervening at an early stage. Thus this Allied landing also succeeded. Nevertheless Kesselring could heave a sigh of relief that there had been no landing in the Rome area, since this would have put all the German troops in southern Italy in mortal danger of being cut off. In Apulia the division entrusted with the task of delaying the strong forces of the British Eighth Army, which had come ashore in the Gulf of Taranto, succeeded in carrying out its mission and managed to rejoin the main body of the German Army. So in the end it all turned out far better than might have been expected. We also succeeded in bringing back all the troops stationed in Sardinia and Corsica, together with their weapons and equipment.

Hitler's original intention had been that Kesselring's divisions should withdraw as rapidly as possible into the Apennines, there to form a common defensive line with Rommel's troops under the latter's command. Now, however, that the catastrophe which he had feared had not in fact materialized, it seemed to him well worth while to defend the territory south of Rome along the narrowest front; this could be held by fewer troops than would be needed north of the Italian capital. He therefore appointed Kesselring to command all our forces in the Italian theatre and Rommel was recalled for fresh duties in the West.

Kesselring's army group succeeded in holding the Italian 'waist' throughout the winter. A severe crisis, however, arose on January 21st, 1944, when American troops landed at first light near Anzio, to the south of Rome. This invasion was a complete surprise, since for many weeks German air reconnaissance had been incapable of reporting on activity in the rear of the Allied armies and in their harbours. Still, we were prepared in theory for such a landing. Nor did the first troops ashore exploit the momentary weakness of the German position at Anzio. Thus we were able to pull back units from the front and to bring in divisions from Northern Italy, Southern France, Germany and the



Balkans, which after forced marches arrived in time to seal off the American beachhead. Had the Allies landed at Livorno instead of south of Rome, the whole German line would have had to be withdrawn north of the Italian capital.

During the month of February two attempts were made, on a large scale by German standards, to throw the enemy back into the sea. They failed, first because the terrain of the former Pontine Marshes could not carry tanks, and secondly because of Hitler's personal intervention in the battle and his direct order that the attacking divisions should all be sent in together. During the first attack troops of one German division reached a point so close to the beaches that the American commander had already decided to issue orders to his men to re-embark, when the Germans, unaware of this, called off their attack. In March Hitler finally ordered the divisions here engaged to go over to the defence; the Italian railway system had been generally smashed, and it was no longer possible, within a reasonable time, to bring up the munitions needed to continue the attack.

In the East the front, held by a round two hundred divisions of all types under German command, was still deep in Russia during the late summer of 1943. It ran from the Bay of Finland via the outskirts of Leningrad, to a point west of Orel, thence to Kharkov and from there to the eastern shore of the Sea of Azov. Some four million German soldiers faced five and a half million Russians, while a further one and a quarter million Germans were tied up in secondary theatres. The majority of these were in the Balkans where increased Partisan activity necessitated the presence of an ever larger army of occupation; other sizeable bodies were to be found in Norway, Denmark and Crete.

In August the Russians began a series of offensives which, during the course of the winter of 1943-44, were to recapture the whole of the Ukraine for them. The Russians had finally recovered from the crisis of 1941. The shameful activities of the 'political soldiers' of the Third Reich, such as the *Sicherheitsdienst* and the *Gestapo*, had long ago destroyed the original hope of the Russian populace that the Germans would liberate them from the Soviet yoke; now they had no choice but to adhere to their government. A fine opportunity had thus been thrown away. The great Russian victories were definitely facilitated, and on occasion even made possible, by Hitler's quite unrealistic obstinacy in refusing to countenance the timely sacrifice of unessential ground. The troops, ordered to hold quite valueless land, suffered very heavy casualties. They were permanently starved of replacements, the divisions were never withdrawn to rest, and, fighting normally against

an enemy superiority of eight-to-one, were gradually worn down. They were 'put in the oven' all for no purpose. The German Army compelled to fight for every yard of Russian soil against an enemy who was steadily obtaining a marked superiority of weapons and equipment, thanks to the delivery of American supplies, was inevitably forced back. By February of 1944 the important sources of raw materials such as the Donetz Basin and the black soil country in the Ukraine had been lost. The front now ran from the Leningrad area to a point west of Smolensk, thence through the western part of the Pripet Marshes, and south of Kiev along the Dnieper towards Odessa. So the German army was back on the old Polish-Russian frontier and in dangerous proximity to the Carpathians. These winter battles had exacted a heavy toll of our best fighting men. Nor were these irreplaceable losses, suffered particularly in the numerous encirclements, the end of the disasters. In the spring of 1944 the Seventeenth Army, which had not been evacuated in time from the Crimea, was cut off. Men spoke, not unjustly, of a German apocalypse in the Ukraine.

This was the unfavourable situation on the Eastern front when, on May 11th, 1944, the large-scale and long-awaited American-British offensive was launched against the German army group in Italy. Though it fought bravely and flinched at no sacrifice, Kesselring's army group could not hope to hold the line in the mountains and around the Anzio beachhead, south of Rome, for any length of time. For humanitarian reasons Kesselring ordered his troops to evacuate Rome without a fight, and on June 6th the Americans entered the Eternal City. Meanwhile the German divisions were in a most perilous situation owing to the tardiness in ordering their withdrawal: only the hesitancy of the Allied pursuit permitted their extrication. On the same day that the Americans entered Rome, Eisenhower issued the order which started the invasion of France, the main operation of the Western Allies against Germany. This is described in the next chapter.





PART FIVE

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# France, 1944

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*Lieutenant-General*

BODO ZIMMERMAN



BODO ZIMMERMAN, who had retired from the German Army in 1920, was recalled to the General Staff in 1939. He was Chief Operations Officer to Commander-in-Chief West from 1940 to 1942 and of Army Group D from then until the German surrender. He was promoted Lieut.-General in April 1944. He is 69 years of age.





LIEUTENANT-GENERAL BODO ZIMMERMAN

## *Background*

I REMEMBER clearly a March morning in 1943 at Saint Germain en Laye, the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief West, just outside Paris. Rundstedt's office was in a small villa, and I was his First Operations Officer or Ia, a post roughly corresponding to that of G.S.O. I (Ops) in the British or G.3 in the American Army.

It was a lovely spring day and the Field-Marshal, when I entered his office, was as spruce and youthful as ever. No matter what the circumstances, Rundstedt always managed to look as neat as a new pin. But this morning his manner was one of deep depression. His first words told me why.

'Stalingrad,' he said, 'has fallen. Now what?'

Like his predecessor in the West, Field-Marshal von Witzleben, Rundstedt was at all times aware that the eventual battle against the British and Americans in France could be, perhaps was being, lost on the Eastern front before ever the Anglo-Saxon armies set foot on the Continent. The men, the guns and the tanks which would be needed to repel the probable invasion were being consumed in the vast holocaust raging at the other end of Europe. This had already been true in 1942: it was to become more so during 1943, the year in which the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. gained supremacy over Sperrle's 3rd Air Fleet, a state of affairs for which Goering's laziness and inefficiency were at least partly to blame.

The heavy fighting in Africa and later in Sicily and Italy provided a secondary though by no means insignificant drain on Germany's resources, already affected by the mounting weight of the enemy's bomber offensive.

Such, then, were very briefly the external circumstances in which Rundstedt attempted to organize the defence of France and the Low Countries against the coming offensive.

The Western Army was spread in a great bow, with most of its forces disposed on or close to the coast. The bow stretched from Holland, along the Channel and Biscay coasts, to the Pyrenees, then along the Mediterranean to Toulon. Part of the Italian Fourth Army, which was also under Rundstedt, manned defensive posi-



tions from Toulon to the Italian frontier. Many German troops, including units of the field Army as well as of the Navy and the Air Force, were locked up in the so-called 'fortresses,' which included exposed islands as well as fortified bases. In the Channel Isles alone, for example, there were some 30-40,000 men consisting of one reinforced infantry division, one anti-aircraft brigade, numerous heavy naval batteries, engineers and construction workers of the Todt Organization. This large body of troops held this isolated position, where the problems of supply were already so great that an entire year's stocks were accumulated, on Hitler's direct orders. There could be no question of Rundstedt's evacuating this or any other area of his enormous front.

It was a front of over six hundred miles, as the crow flies, and much longer if one measured the coast line of the mainland and islands. Such a vast line could not, of course, be 'held' with the troops available. Nor indeed were there enough divisions in the West during 1943 to meet a large-scale invasion at any point.

In addition to the troops stretched out along the coast, there were insignificant units of elder men in the rear areas under the Military Commanders of France and Belgium. These could not be regarded as a reserve. Indeed there was at this time no sort of flexible, strong, mobile reserve in the West. Whenever such a reserve began to be built up in 1943, the units were invariably taken away to fight in Russia or Italy, particularly Russia. In fact it would be no exaggeration to say that the Western Army was steadily drained of all its able-bodied man-power and of all its supplies for the Eastern Front.

As a result organizational and tactical dispositions in the West were a mere patchwork. Commanders, troops and equipment became, quite frankly, second-rate. From 1943 on, the basis of the Western Army consisted of over-age men armed with over-age weapons. Neither the one nor the other were a match, even physically, for the demands of the coming heavy invasion battle.

### *The Bluff of the Atlantic Wall*

To conceal the real weakness of Germany's western defences, Hitler ordered the building of fortifications along the coast, with greatest intensity along the Channel, during 1942. Gigantic concrete structures sprang up, but of course it was impossible to complete these strong fortifications everywhere, let alone arm this 'Atlantic Wall.' The French Mediterranean coast, which the Germans only



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occupied in November of 1942, was not fortified at all. Owing to supply shortages most of the weapons for the Atlantic Wall, down to mines and even barbed wire, were taken from the old West Wall along the Franco-German frontier.

It was the policy of the Supreme Command to transfer exhausted, often decimated, divisions from the Eastern Front to the West for rest and rehabilitation. As soon as these divisions had been re-formed and re-equipped they returned to Russia. Thus our Order of Battle, which frequently showed numerous divisions which were in fact only skeletons, was quite misleading. And the draining of combat troops continued. A typical example of this was the arrival of the Russians.

By order of the Armed Forces Supreme Command (O.K.W.) twenty of the best equipped battalions were transferred from the West, with their heavy weapons, to the Eastern Front. In return Rundstedt was promised sixty battalions of the so-called 'Eastern volunteers,' mostly former Russian prisoners of war, ill trained and ill equipped. What earthly use could such troops be against the enemy's tremendous weight of technical skill? What reason was there to believe that these 'volunteers' would even pretend to fight against their Western allies? It was all quite insane.

During the spring of 1943 Rundstedt attempted to report to Hitler on the actual situation as it then existed in the West. It was time wasted. The interview on the Obersalzberg, which lasted for three hours, consisted of a two-hour monologue by Hitler giving his views on the *Eastern* front, followed by a tea-hour during which the discussion of official matters was forbidden. Rundstedt's mounting fury, as he shifted in his chair, can be easily imagined. All he could do was, later, to utter some caustic comments on his Supreme Commander and order that a detailed report on the whole subject of coastal defences in the West be prepared for despatch to the O.K.W.

Throughout this year R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. interference in France increased in volume and efficiency. This affected German administration, industry, railway construction and finally the railways themselves. The building of defences along the Channel grew more and more difficult. Nor was this facilitated by a typical administrative 'mix-up,' which resulted in the transfer of thousands of construction workers from the building of defences to the building of launching sites for the hush-hush V weapons. This was done without informing Rundstedt. His anger when he discovered that



the workers had been stolen from behind his back is surely comprehensible.

Meanwhile in the late summer of 1943 a basic order, entitled 'Führer Directive No. 51,' was issued. This stated that the Western Theatre would be the decisive defence area. The point of main effort, or *Schwerpunkt*, of Germany's defence would henceforth be the Channel. In support of this policy the bulk of the new heavy weapons' production together with the necessary munitions and supplies would be sent to Rundstedt. Not content with this reasonable strategic directive, Hitler also gave operational instructions to his Commander-in-Chief West. Führer Directive No. 51 laid down that the enemy must not be allowed to maintain a foothold on the coast, but must be thrown back into the sea at once. The coast in fact must be held in all circumstances, and all withdrawal was forbidden.

Rundstedt's reply, which reached the O.K.W. in the autumn, was the detailed report which he had ordered to be prepared after his abortive interview with Hitler earlier in the year. In its effect at Supreme Headquarters it was something of a bombshell.

The report stated that most of the German soldiers in the West were too old. Officers with artificial limbs were not infrequent. A battalion had been formed of men suffering from ear complaints. Later a division, the 70th, was created for men with poor stomachs who needed special diet. (The division was to fight bravely on Walcheren Island, despite the fact that many of the troops were in constant pain.) As for mobility, most of the units in the West were insufficiently flexible or even completely inflexible and therefore tactically of only limited value. There was a severe lack of heavy weapons and particularly of tanks—repeated crises in the East had nullified the expectations of reinforcements contained in Führer Directive No. 51. Only a very few parachute and panzer divisions formed an exception to this depressing picture and could be regarded as theoretically fit for operations.

Nor was this the end. There was no strategic reserve whatever in the West, though such a reserve was supposed to intervene rapidly and effectively at the point of main effort as soon as the invasion had begun. The Air Force was so weak that it could not hope to curb the operations of the R.A.F. and the U.S.A.A.F. The Navy consisted of a few motor launches and a couple of torpedo flotillas. Submarines could not operate properly in the Channel owing to its shallowness.



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This report made a great impression on Hitler and once again promises of reinforcements were sent to us. The reinforcements themselves, however, only arrived in small numbers or not at all as crisis after crisis necessitated their transfer to the East. As for the Air Force, Hitler promised that powerful groups of bombers and fighters would be switched to France as soon as the invasion began. Even Hitler should have known that by then it would be too late. Indeed perhaps he did know: perhaps these 'orders' were only another example of his powers of self-deception.

Thus did 1943 pass in France, while across the Channel the British and American forces were being built up for the gigantic operation which would undoubtedly decide the outcome of the war and which Rundstedt anticipated for the spring of the following year. Nor did the Commander-in-Chief West cherish any illusions concerning the violence with which the blow would be struck and the tremendous technical virtuosity with which it would be backed. Allied landings in Sicily and at Salerno had shown how little the bravery and sacrifice of Kesselring's men had availed against the enemy's naval gunnery and air supremacy. And we could well anticipate that this would be nothing when compared to what was being made ready for us.

### *Rundstedt at St. Germain*

I recall two characteristic anecdotes concerning the Commander-in-Chief West during these months of waiting.

As the tempo of the Allied air attacks increased, his staff grew worried for the Field-Marshal's personal safety, though he himself took no notice of the raids. While he was absent from his headquarters an air-raid shelter was rapidly built in the garden of his house at St. Germain and most effectively camouflaged. But when the old gentleman saw it he declared quite categorically that nothing would ever induce him 'to set foot inside the thing.' However one evening Allied bombers dropped marker flares over St. Germain and it seemed likely that a rain of bombs would follow. I therefore ordered Rundstedt's son, who was acting as his father's aide de camp, to take the Field-Marshal to the shelter. Young Rundstedt succeeded eventually, and after meeting considerable opposition, in carrying out this order. As it happened the bombers hit a neighbouring suburb; I was much occupied on the telephone, and I forgot all about the Commander-in-Chief. An hour later my



telephone rang. It was the Field-Marshal who simply asked, in his usual courteous fashion:

‘Zimmerman, can I please come out now?’

Another story about the raids was one he himself told with a smile in our officers’ mess.

It was his custom each day to take a walk through the streets of St. Germain, alone and armed only with his walking-stick. The air raid sirens howled. The Field-Marshal, as usual, took no notice. Nor did an elderly French housewife whom he passed, her shopping basket on her arm. ‘But, Madame,’ Rundstedt enquired, ‘are you not frightened of the bombs?’ The old lady replied: ‘Why should I be afraid, *mon maréchal*? They won’t bomb St. Germain. It has no military importance, for nothing ever happens here.’

### *Rommel*

Towards the end of 1943 Hitler assigned Rommel the task of inspecting the coastal defences in the West, from Denmark to the Spanish frontier. He had no troops, save his highly competent staff. Supreme Headquarters, however, expected valuable help from Rommel’s initiative, experience and sound technical knowledge. In addition, it was hoped that his presence in the West would be useful as a propaganda weapon.

I recall his first conference with Rundstedt, in Paris, shortly before Christmas. Rundstedt outlined the situation briefly and sceptically, speaking of the poor quality of the troops, the dangerous weakness of the Air Force, the almost total absence of naval craft and stressing particularly the main defect of our defensive organization, namely the complete lack of a powerful central reserve. He ended with the words: ‘It all looks very black to me.’

Afterwards the two Field-Mmarshals lunched together. A few senior staff officers, of whom I was one, were present. We expected one or other of the Field-Mmarshals to open the conversation, but neither showed any inclination to do so. Both were apparently preoccupied with their thoughts, which after their discussion can only have been of a most sombre hue. It was a strange, silent meal which will never be forgotten by any man who was present.

In the course of the winter it was decided at the O.K.W. to give Rommel a command in the West. Hitler’s first idea was that Rommel should command a large mobile force intended to counter-attack and defeat the invading forces at the earliest opportunity. There were, however, no suitable formations available. Rommel,



with Rundstedt's approval, was therefore given command of Army Group B, which covered the invasion front. His command included the divisions in Holland, the Fifteenth Army along the Channel, and the seventh Army in Normandy and Brittany. Rommel, when carrying out his inspection, had realized that only the Channel sector had a certain defensive strength. Now he was in a position to do more than merely make recommendations, and he set to work with all the great energy of which he was capable.

Throughout the spring the defences were intensively strengthened. Two innovations for which Rommel was responsible were the erection of the so-called 'Rommel Asparagus,' which was the planting with posts of areas previously considered suitable for the landing of gliders, and the sowing of the beaches with underwater obstacles and mines. These feverish preparations became of course known to the Allies through their air reconnaissance; indeed the underwater obstacles caused them to alter their plan and land at low tide instead of at high. It was hoped that they would be sufficiently worried to make them postpone their invasion, if only for a few months. For Rommel's and Rundstedt's objective now was to gain time. With this end in view attempts were made to mislead the Allies by scattering staffs, disguised as the headquarters of panzer divisions and corps, across France. These dummy staffs could not, however, hope to confuse the enemy for long. There were too many French and British agents in France for the trick to work for more than a month or two.

However, Rommel's energy and drive had a very animating effect on the troops. Their morale certainly improved, though he worked them so hard that by the summer signs of fatigue were beginning to appear.

### *Coastal Defences in Normandy*

The Channel sector—by which is meant the coastal sector between the mouths of the Seine and of the Scheldt—had always been regarded as the most likely point of assault, being the part of the coast which is nearest to England. This assumption had been strengthened by Führer Directive No. 51. Priority in the deployment of troops and the building of defences had therefore been assigned to this sector. As these defences increased, the relative neglect of Normandy became more and more obvious. This was noticed by a commission of inspection which visited the West on behalf of the O.K.W. in January 1944.



In Normandy the coastal defences were in general undermanned, because the sectors assigned to the coastal divisions were too wide. The Navy was largely to blame for this. Naval intelligence had declared that the coast between the Seine and the Cotentin peninsula was unsuitable for the landing of large bodies of troops: the western Cotentin was clearly quite out of the question as an assault area: while the eastern Cotentin was believed adequately covered by the powerful fortress of Cherbourg. This last and traditional assumption, which was held until the actual invasion proved it incorrect, had also led to an optimistic overestimate of the terrain which the fortress could command. Its land front was a good twenty-five miles too long, and when the time came the fortress proved untenable by its garrison.

From April of 1944 evidence began to accumulate that Normandy might be the scene of the coming invasion. This evidence was, however, never conclusive, and the Channel sector remained the principal defensive area. No troops might be withdrawn from there to defend Normandy. But Hitler, who shared this presentiment concerning Normandy, ordered that the 91st Air Landing Division and the 6th Parachute Regiment be stationed in the area which seemed most likely to be threatened by parachute or glider borne troops. Incidentally, despite their names, this division and regiment were intended to fight as normal infantry.

### *Air Situation in the West*

The increasing weight of air attack, both by day and by night, revealed the relative impotence of the Luftwaffe. The French and Belgian rail networks, as well as the Luftwaffe's own installations, were the main objectives. Troop movements by train became more and more difficult, until at last the reinforcement of the coast had to be carried out almost entirely by road. When the Seine and Loire bridges were methodically destroyed, even road movement grew difficult and very slow. Meanwhile the bases of the Luftwaffe had been pushed back from the coast to the Paris area. These raids were so widespread that a study of the areas attacked gave little if any indication as to the point against which the invasion would be launched.

Our own extremely spasmodic air reconnaissance over southern and south-eastern England was hardly more enlightening. In fact the German command remained completely in the dark concerning



the future target area, which might be anywhere along the Channel or in Normandy. The greatest advantage that the Allies enjoyed was that, in view of our lack of a clear intelligence picture, we must be prepared for an assault at almost any point along this extended coast; but when that assault came it would be in a relatively small sector with concentrated technical power and with the best equipped and best trained forces at the disposal of the enemy. This knowledge led to repeated alarms, particularly during those nights when tide and weather conditions made a landing feasible.

### *Hitler's Western Strategy*

There can be no doubt that Hitler's entire attitude towards German strategy in the West had, since 1942, been based on one conviction: namely that the battle in the East would not be brought to a quick conclusion and that its developments would be increasingly felt in the West.

At that time, no matter how unfavourably the Eastern battle might go, we still possessed sufficient Russian territory to make any direct threat to Germany herself a remote danger.

In the West, however, the distances between the Channel and the Ruhr were so short that a successful mass invasion of the former must quickly bring the leading enemy troops to Germany's most vital industrial area. From a spatial point of view the peril in the West was therefore greater than in the East. Hence Hitler's basic theory that the enemy must be defeated on the beaches and thrown back into the sea at once. Hence the building of the Atlantic Wall. As the months of 1944 passed, this thesis was reinforced by one simple consideration. Owing to heavy losses in Russia there were only inadequate mobile forces available in the West to fight a battle of manoeuvre. There was therefore no choice but to adhere to Hitler's theory of rigid, linear defence. This was the primary cause, the fatal decision—if decision it can be called—which underlay our defeat in the West.

### *Our Knowledge of the Enemy*

By the spring of 1944 we believed that some seventy-five Allied divisions were assembled in Britain. Of these sixty-five, including six airborne divisions, were considered suitable for use in the invasion. They were believed to consist of twenty to twenty-five American and forty to forty-five British divisions.



From April 1944 Allied landing exercises, carried out in co-operation with airborne troops, increased along the coasts of England. Since March high quality formations had been returning to Great Britain from the Mediterranean: these included the 1st and 9th United States Infantry Divisions, the British 51st Highland Division, 1st Airborne and 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions, in addition to a special American engineer assault brigade.

The landing tonnage available in British harbours was estimated to be enough for the transfer across the Channel of twenty divisions in a single flight.

In addition there were believed to be a further forty-five divisions, trained and ready for combat, available in the United States. They could be shipped direct to the invasion area and unloaded as soon as a bridgehead had been formed.

In the air we anticipated that we would be outnumbered in the ratio of 50:1. Our naval forces were, as already stated, virtually non-existent.

Therefore all that Rundstedt could muster against this massive force poised to strike anywhere along the French coast was a single, immobile defensive system consisting of ground troops without air support.

### *German Order of Battle, Normandy, June 5, 1944*

There were three divisions holding the critical stretch of the Norman coast. From east to west these were the 716th, 352nd and 709th Infantry Divisions. The latter was also responsible for the defence of Cherbourg. One regiment of the 243rd Infantry Division was located in north-western Normandy, its other two, together with the 91st Air Landing Division and the 6th Parachute Regiment being stationed near the base of the Cotentin peninsula as defence against airborne landings. The west coast of the peninsula, because of its formation and of the very high tides prevalent there, was not regarded as a danger point and was guarded by a single brigade, mostly bicyclists, called the 30th Mobile Brigade. At the request of the Commander-in-Chief West, the Military Commander France transferred a garrison regiment, the 1057th, to Normandy. This unit was poorly equipped and had few heavy weapons. The three coastal divisions in the area which saw the assault held sectors averaging twenty-five miles in breadth, with relatively few fortified strong points.

The only immediate reserve available to Rommel as commander of Army Group B was the 21st Panzer Division in the area east of the Orne. The bulk of this division was assembled in the Caen area, though part of its armoured infantry had been moved closer to the coast as a security measure.

### *Weather and Tide*

Needless to say tides, weather and wind were a source of constant preoccupation to us and to the Navy along the entire coast. The system was that if these looked likely to favour an assault in the early hours at any particular point, the troops stationed there would be alerted. The total number of dawn alerts which therefore were ordered at one spot or another was wellnigh astronomic. The strain on the men, who were already carrying out training exercises and building defences at high pressure, was considerable, possibly even excessive.

During June 4th–5th the weather situation was considered unfavourable for a landing on the Normandy coast, an opinion which was shared by the naval experts. The commander of the Seventh Army, Colonel-General Dollmann, who later died of a heart attack during the Normandy battle, therefore ordered a temporary relaxation of 'alert' conditions, and summoned his senior officers to Rennes on the 5th for a map exercise.

On the 5th wind velocity in Eastern Normandy was Force 5, direction E.S.E. The force of the sea was between 4 and 5. German naval craft, attempting to put to sea for mine-laying operations, were forced back into harbour, when the stormy conditions threatened to overturn the heavily laden vessels. The moon was nearly full.

Thus despite the fact that low tide in eastern Normandy was due between 05.00 and 06.00 hours on the 6th, there seemed no prospect of an immediate assault against this sector of the coast.

### *First Intimation of the Invasion*

At about 21.15 hours, or a quarter-past nine in the evening of June 5th, I was in our officers' mess at St. Germain when the chief intelligence officer on the staff of C.-in-C. West came to look for me. He was in a state of high excitement, for his people had just decoded a British wireless message. It was the habit of the Allies to communicate with their many agents in the West by radio, and



not infrequently our experts succeeded in decoding these apparently harmless signals.

This, however, was a signal of a very different type, for it ordered the mobilization of the entire French resistance movement for the coming night. This could have only one meaning: the invasion was about to begin.

Needless to say we had made detailed arrangements, which were immediately and automatically put into force. Rundstedt and his Chief of Staff were informed, as was Rommel's headquarters. Rommel himself was on his way back from the Obersalzberg, where he had been to see Hitler, and was not expected to arrive before the following afternoon. The orders for a general alert were sent out, though many of the senior officers of the Seventh Army could not be reached personally, since they were in their cars returning from Rennes to their respective units. Supreme Headquarters in Germany was informed of the decoded signal and of the measures taken.

All this was done quite quickly. And then, for a time, nothing more happened. Midnight passed, one o'clock, and still no further messages reached St. Germain. At about two o'clock we were ready to believe that it was just another false alarm, when Army Group B rang through, reporting parachute landings in Normandy shortly after midnight.

These parachutists were being supported by glider-borne troops and it became apparent almost at once that there were three large-scale landings taking place, two on the Cotentin peninsula, north-west and west of Carentan, the third just east of the Orne. Army Group B informed us that the necessary counter-measures were being taken and that heavy fighting was already developing. Incidentally, though Army Group B did not know this at the time, the unsuspecting commander of our 91st Air Landing Division, returning from Rennes, had driven straight into one of these air landing areas and was killed instantly. During the course of the night the airborne troops were identified. They were the 82nd and 101st American and the 6th British Airborne Divisions.

### *Rundstedt's First Reaction*

Though it was quite impossible at this early stage to say whether or not the Allies intended also to attack elsewhere, it was obvious that they must support their airborne divisions by seaborne landings almost immediately, since otherwise their most valuable parachute and glider troops would inevitably be cut to pieces.



We could therefore expect the seaborne landings at first light, and to judge by the dropping areas of the airborne divisions, the assault was likely to come between the Orne and St. Vaast la Hogue.

Whether this was the main operation or only a preliminary to another landing elsewhere along the coast could not of course be known at this stage. Rundstedt, however, was of the opinion that if the Allies succeeded in establishing a firm beachhead, they would make this their point of main effort. It was therefore essential that their invading troops be defeated while there was yet time.

There were two panzer divisions in the West which were technically under command of Supreme Headquarters, not of Commander-in-Chief West, and were officially described as O.K.W. reserve. These were the 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division, in Western France, and the formidable Panzer Lehr Division, stationed south-west of Paris. Without waiting for the approval of the O.K.W., Rundstedt now put these two divisions under command of Army Group B and ordered them to march towards Caen. He also activated the headquarters called Panzer Group West, commanded by General Geyr von Schweppenburg, which was the staff intended to fight the armoured battle which, it was hoped, would result in the expulsion of the British and American forces from the Continent as soon as they had landed.

As it happened this plan, to commit our panzer units in one powerful blow, never materialized. They were delayed on the roads, principally by bombing, and when at last they reached the battlefield they had to be sent in piecemeal. A contributing factor to the failure of Rundstedt's plan was interference by the O.K.W.

### *Early Hours*

For towards six o'clock on the morning of June 6th the Commander-in-Chief West received two important messages. The first was from the front. Under very heavy artillery and air cover, large Allied forces were attempting to land between the mouths of the Rivers Orne and Vire and also farther to the north, on the base of the Cotentin. The second, which came in a few minutes later, was from the O.K.W., Hitler's Supreme Headquarters. In violent terms Rundstedt was upbraided for his orders to the two panzer divisions which, we were informed, should not have been moved without the prior approval of the O.K.W. 'One cannot yet say for sure where the main invasion will come and, besides, Hitler has not yet



decided.' Despite Rundstedt's insistence that the landing was in full progress, the O.K.W. remained adamant. The two panzer divisions were therefore halted.

Throughout the morning and early afternoon I, the Chief of Staff, General Blumentritt, and Rundstedt himself repeatedly telephoned the O.K.W., in order to find out what Hitler had decided in the matter of these two divisions. Apparently he was asleep, and no one dared wake him. It was not until his usual conference, between three and four o'clock that afternoon, that Hitler decided to allow the commitment of the divisions. They were immediately ordered to resume their advance.

But by then it was too late. During the morning, and until 11.00 hours, a hazy fog had covered Normandy. This would have provided the divisions with some protection from air attack and have permitted rapid movement. Now the haze had dissipated, and the whole of the area through which the divisions must march was being most intensively patrolled by the Allied air forces. No road movement by day was possible in view of this air umbrella, which reached from Normandy to the Paris area.

By noon on June 6th it was clear that the enemy, making full use of his technical superiority, had succeeded in carrying out small landings—at ebb-tide, on account of our underwater obstacles—north of Caen, in the Bayeux area and apparently also in the neighbourhood of the Vire estuary. Farther to the north, in the area of Ste. Mère Eglise, other assaults were in progress but these had not yet gained a firm foothold on shore.

Our battle against the airborne forces which had landed inside the Cotentin seemed to be developing favourably: in particular, elements of the United States 82nd Airborne Division were being subjected to concentric attacks by our reserves and were in considerable trouble. Heavy casualties on both sides bore witness to the violence of the fighting. It later transpired that the strong wind had carried parts of the 82nd Airborne Division farther inland than had been intended, separating them from the bulk of their division which had been put down closer to the east coast.

The 6th British Airborne Division, east of the Orne, was keeping relatively quiet. The 21st Panzer Division, Rommel's mobile reserve, should have attacked here at once, on its own initiative, but instead it awaited orders. When the division was at last sent in, in the course of the morning, it seemed more important to Seventh Army that it be used to clear up the beachhead north of Caen and to relieve our



encircled strongpoints in that area, rather than to attack the 6th British Airborne. This involved a crossing of the Orne which of course took time. In the late afternoon the 21st Panzer Division attacked the beachhead, its advance guard did in fact reach the coast and a few of our strong points were relieved. But at this moment fresh British airborne forces landed immediately behind the attacking division, which therefore turned about and withdrew. It is fruitless to criticize this decision by the divisional commander: he was on the spot and had no choice but to follow his own judgment.

The net result of the day's fighting was as follows. The enemy's initial beachheads had been formed and these would now be rapidly and steadily reinforced. He had in fact succeeded in breaking the crust of our coastal defences. A vast armada lay out to sea from which a steady stream of swift landing craft poured men, tanks, guns and munitions ashore. Our defending troops were so pinned down by shells and bombs that they could scarcely follow what was happening.

The battle against the two American airborne divisions remained undecided. Fighting heavily, they were advancing against the rear of the German coastal forces to the north of the Vire. Should they succeed in breaking through to the beaches, then the assault would have succeeded here too and reinforcements could be poured in to them.

### *The Invasion Assured*

The O.K.W. repeatedly ordered, in the most urgent terms, that the invading armies be thrown back into the sea. We were not told who was to do this. The shells of the enemy's naval guns had a devastating effect, and their range was far greater than we had anticipated. Allied air supremacy forbade all large-scale movement by daylight, so that within a few days all our supply routes in and into Normandy became chaotic. It was soon extremely difficult even to supply our forces already heavily engaged. Simultaneous intensive air attacks on the bridges across the lower Seine and on the inner rail network around Paris made it impossible to route troops and supplies through the capital and very difficult to move them across the river.

During the next few days, in continuous heavy fighting, the Allies succeeded in enlarging their bridgeheads step by step. Those between the Orne and Vire were joined, so that all this part of the coast was now in enemy hands. In the area of Carentan and to the



north-west the Americans were also making progress. We had now identified two enemy army groups in action, the British 21st on the east and the American 12th on the West. The armoured counter-attacks constantly ordered by our Supreme Command with ever-growing urgency came to nothing: they either bogged down at an early stage or else could not be launched at all because the forces intended for the counter-attack had to be diverted to deal with one or other of the new crises which were always developing.

After three or four days had thus passed there could no longer be any doubt that the large-scale landings, which were intended to decide the outcome of the war, had succeeded. The only course now open to us was to attempt to seal off the Allied forces inside Normandy and thus prevent them from breaking out into the middle of France where they would be able to operate over a wide area. It was clear to us that their primary objective must be Paris, for history has proved that he who has Paris has France.

It is impossible here to describe in detail all the developments of the battle for Normandy. Suffice it to say that the enemy's strategy soon became apparent. This was to advance from the Carentan area and thus gradually to develop a pincer movement which would finally cut off the whole of the Cotentin peninsula and thus lead to the eventual capture of the Cherbourg fortress.

As the success of this operation became more and more probable, Rundstedt and Rommel agreed that the time had come for Hitler to decide personally what we must do next and how we were to go on fighting the battle in the West; in a word what *our* strategy was to be. It was clear to the Field-M Marshals that limited measures could no longer hope to change the situation as it now stood. The only course open to us was to seal off Normandy along a favourable line, well to the rear of the present front. Along such a line it should be feasible once again to create a strong defensive position, which would enable us to withdraw our mobile reserves from the fighting and thus make them available for the sort of operations for which they were intended. The Field-M Marshals' urgent demands for an interview with Hitler were accepted.

### *The Margival Conference*

In circumstances of extreme secrecy, Hitler arrived at his old command post, at Margival, between Soissons and Laon. It was a particularly well-hidden installation, and there he met the two



Field Marshals with their Chiefs of Staff. Their first reports on the situation certainly impressed him and he promised to lay down the necessary directives which they required for the next stage of the campaign at once. But when the conversation turned on the consequences to be drawn from the successful Allied landing, his mood changed. Rommel expressed himself with particular force, demanding that political conclusions be drawn from the military situation in the West. Hitler became angry, took Rommel's arguments ill, and ordered him to concern himself with military, not political, matters. The gist of Hitler's remarks seem to have been that in any case no one would make peace with him.

During the course of this conference a message was received describing a new and serious crisis which was developing in the area south of Cherbourg. American armoured forces had broken out of their Carentan beachhead in a north-westerly direction and in a large encircling movement were threatening the fortress itself. Hitler announced his intention of visiting this sector personally next morning.

He did not do so. Later that day a V.1, fired at London, went astray, circled and exploded not far from Hitler's command post. All the security forces began feverishly to investigate this mishap. Hitler himself immediately flew back to Berchtesgaden with a powerful fighter escort.

The new instructions which resulted from this conference were simply the old ones repeated afresh. Cherbourg, together with every other square yard of Norman soil, was to be held to the last man and the last round. This was of course impossible. The landwards front of the Cherbourg fortress was far too extended to be held by the remnants of the 709th Division and by those elements of the 77th Division which had been forced back into it. On June 26th Cherbourg fell. The first stage of the Normandy battle was thereby concluded.

### *Changes in the German Command*

In late June Rommel drafted yet another very grave report for Hitler on the situation. Rundstedt gave his approval to this. So too did General Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg who expressed his own views concerning the senseless attrition of his panzer divisions in the Caen beachhead and who demanded a reappraisal of German operational tactics. The two Field-M Marshals requested another



interview with Hitler, which took place at Berchtesgaden towards the end of the month.

The Field-M Marshals were treated with a marked lack of courtesy and were kept waiting for several hours. When at last Hitler received them, he treated them to a lengthy monologue concerning the effects to be expected from the new 'miracle weapons.' The Field-M Marshals left in a very bad temper indeed. Back at his headquarters, Rundstedt telephoned Keitel and told him that they had better find a younger man to continue the battle: he himself was too old. When Keitel asked him what he thought they should do, Rundstedt replied loudly and clearly: 'End the war, you fools!'

As Rundstedt had foreseen and desired, he was relieved of his command. General Geyr von Schweppenburg was also sacked. On July 3rd Field-Marshal von Kluge, who had spent the previous week at Berchtesgaden being indoctrinated by Hitler, arrived at St. Germain. In view of what he had been told at Supreme Headquarters, it is small wonder he was convinced that Rundstedt and Rommel were over-pessimistic and that means could be found to fight and win the battle in the way that Hitler wished.

It was not long, however, before he realized the true nature of the position. His repeated visits to the front soon showed him the contrast between the poor equipment of the German troops and the lavish means at the disposal of the enemy. He saw with his own eyes the terrible effects of Allied air supremacy. After a few days he had no choice but to admit that Rommel and Rundstedt had been correct in their appreciation of the situation.

Meanwhile the fighting in Normandy went on with undiminished ferocity. Each day saw further advances on the part of the Allies, whose intention now was to establish a straight front running southwards right across Normandy.

On July 15th Rommel submitted another grave summary of his own views concerning the situation to Kluge. Kluge, in return, agreed to consult with all the senior commanders at the front in order to elicit their opinions.

Rommel himself visited the front daily. On the 17th, while returning to his headquarters, his car was attacked by a low-flying fighter plane, his driver killed, and he himself carried unconscious to a hospital near Paris. His skull had been severely fractured. So at this critical stage of the campaign, Army Group B was without a commander.

Hitler's solution to the problem of finding a successor for



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Rommel was most curious. He ordered Kluge to take over command of Army Group B in addition to his duties as Commander-in-Chief West. Kluge therefore moved to Rommel's headquarters at La Roche Guyon, and the staff of C.-in-C. West was ordered to take decisions on all matters pertaining to his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief without prior reference to Army Group B. This produced a most complicated state of affairs, since the views of Kluge in his capacity as commander of Army Group B not infrequently conflicted with the views which should have been his as Commander-in-Chief of the whole theatre of operations. The top-level command of the German armed forces was a curious construction: the present command situation in the West was one of its more striking oddities.

### *July 20th in the West*

The attempt to kill Hitler did not in any way affect the fighting in Normandy, so I shall deal with it only very briefly. Field-Marshal von Kluge was hesitant for a time whether he should believe the reports from the O.K.W. in East Prussia that Hitler lived or whether he should accept those coming from Berlin which maintained the contrary, and act accordingly. Finally he spoke personally to a general at the O.K.W. who made it quite clear that Hitler had not been killed. Meanwhile, however, the Military Governor of France, General Heinrich von Stülpnagel, had obeyed the orders of the conspirators and arrested the leading SS and Gestapo men in Paris. As soon as Kluge learned that the assassination attempt had failed, he ordered Stülpnagel to release his captives and suggested that he go into hiding. Stülpnagel instead attempted to blow his brains out. He only managed to blind himself. While semi-conscious he repeated the name of Rommel, and this seems to be what first suggested to the Gestapo that Rommel too was implicated in the plot. Later Stülpnagel was executed and Rommel, as is known, compelled to take poison. But, as I have said, none of this had any effect upon the troops fighting in Normandy.

### *Allied Strength in Normandy*

During June we had formed a fairly clear picture of Allied strength in Normandy. Facing the right-hand half of our front was the Second British Army, of four corps, with some eight or nine infantry, one airborne and two or three armoured divisions as



well as five or six armoured brigades: facing our left-hand sector was the First United States Army, also of four corps, with some nine infantry, two airborne and two armoured divisions as well as several armoured Combat Commands. All these units had been identified in action.

In addition to the names of Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery, from July on we were to hear more and more of General Patton. He seemed to be commanding a new army on the invasion front—later identified as the United States Third Army. He was reported to be an expert commander of armoured troops and something of a daredevil. We nicknamed him 'the American Guderian.'

Until mid-July the enemy point of main effort had been in the Caen area, but at about that time it was apparently transferred to the St. Lô sector. There was evidence that the Americans were preparing a major offensive here with the purpose of achieving a break-through.

This attack was duly launched and on July 27th the Americans broke through west of St. Lô. The Third Army was now committed, to the west of the United States First Army and succeeded in fighting its way down the west coast of Normandy towards Avranches.

Shortly before this Kluge had passed on to Hitler Rommel's grave report, to which reference has already been made, together with the following remarks of his own:

'I arrived here with the firm intention of carrying out your orders to hold fast at all costs. But when one realizes that the price which must be paid consists of the slow but steady annihilation of our troops—I am thinking particularly of the *Hitlerjugend* Division whose conduct deserves the highest commendation—and when one sees that the flow of supplies of almost every sort and also of reinforcements is completely inadequate, while our artillery and anti-tank guns and ammunition are quite incapable of fighting the type of battle that has been ordered—so that our only true defensive weapon is the morale of our brave soldiers—then one cannot help entertaining the gravest doubts as to what the immediate future holds in store for this front. I can report that up to now, despite daily losses of ground, the front has been held, thanks to the magnificent bravery of our troops and to the firmness of will of our officers, particularly the junior ones. Nevertheless, despite all our fervent efforts, the moment is approaching when this sorely tried front will be broken. Once the enemy has penetrated into open country, organized operations will no longer be possible to



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control owing to our troops' lack of mobility. As the responsible commander on this front, I regard it as my duty to draw your attention, my Führer, to the consequences which will ensue.

'At the commanders' conference south of Caen my closing words were: We shall hold fast, and if no help arrives in time to improve our position fundamentally, then we shall die an honourable death on the field of battle.'

This *ultima ratio*, unfortunately, offered no tactical, let alone strategic, solution to the problem of what was to be done when the front, which was steadily growing more brittle, finally broke asunder and the enemy poured out of Normandy into the broad fields of France. Already, on July 18th, a break-through by British forces in the Caen area had only just been prevented by the straining of every nerve and muscle. This attack, incidentally, had been carried out by massed tanks against a single division, the 16th Luftwaffe Field Division, which had previously been plastered with one thousand tons of bombs.

Such was the situation when the Americans attacked at St. Lô on the 27th. The threat to Avranches was plain. On July 31st Avranches fell and with it the unblown bridge of Pontaubault. The door to Central France was open.

### *German Casualties*

From the beginning of the invasion until June 25th we lost: 897 officers (including 6 generals and 63 regimental commanders), 40,217 N.C.O.s, and men, 1,956 Eastern auxiliaries: total, 43,070.

Three weeks later, that is to say in mid-July, our total casualties had risen to 97,000. We had at that date received, in all, 6,000 replacements and 17 new tanks in place of the 225 which had been destroyed.

By August 7th Army Group B had suffered the following casualties: 3,219 officers (including 14 generals and 201 regimental commanders), 141,040 N.C.O.s and men, 3,810 Eastern auxiliaries: total, 148,075.

On August 14th, that is to say one week later, this figure had risen to 158,930.

### *The Falaise Pocket*

The Supreme Command of course recognized at once the extreme peril created by the American capture of Avranches. A deluge of



urgent orders and telephone calls descended on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief West and on Army Group B. 'The enemy will not be permitted to break out into the open country: every man must hold fast to the end.'

A little later the following message arrived:

'The Führer orders that all available panzer forces will be withdrawn from the front, will be placed under the command of General Eberbach and will counter-attack with objective Avranches.'

The difficulties in mounting this counter-attack were enormous, but it was finally launched during the night of August 7th-8th. After a certain initial success it was brought to a standstill at first light by the intervention of the Allied Air Force. This was the first time in history that an attacking force had been stopped solely by bombing.

The Avranches gap was now being steadily widened and through it poured, division after division, the tanks of General Patton's Third Army, out into the open country between the Seine and the Loire. Their main objective was Le Mans, their secondary objective the rounding up of the weak and scattered German forces in Brittany after cutting their line of retreat southwards across the Loire.

The left wing of the German Seventh Army was now in the air. Inadequate attempts at reinforcement could no longer affect the course of events. Since the fall of Le Mans on August 10th the United States First Army was rolling up the 7th Army from the south, while the Third Army was moving around to encircle it from the east.

But the American encirclement was planned on a larger scale than this. Their principal forces were now directed on Chartres, while powerful secondary forces headed for the central reaches of the Seine, south of Paris. The objective of these operations was apparent. It was no less than the cutting of German communications west of Paris and encircling the whole of the Seventh and Fifth Panzer Armies south of the lower Seine.

Very heavy fighting between August 10th and 20th, causing us very high casualties in men and material for which no replacements were forthcoming, led to a steady constriction of the Seventh Army. During the course of this battle the Canadian First Army appeared in action, on the left of the British Second.

Thus was the celebrated 'Falaise pocket' created. The Fifth Panzer Army, thanks to its greater mobility, was able to escape from this



pocket more or less intact, but it was threatened by a larger encirclement in the Chartres–Dreux area.

As an example of the chaos which reigned behind our front, it may be noted that the first Allied soldier to enter Chartres was a solitary war correspondent in a jeep. He was of course taken prisoner by the Germans, and expressed his anger in no unmeasured terms that the American tanks had not yet arrived as promised.

### *The End of Field-Marshal von Kluge*

Towards the middle of August Field-Marshal von Kluge decided to visit the Seventh Army, which was not yet completely encircled, in the Falaise pocket. Perhaps it was his feeling of heavy responsibility as Commander-in-Chief, or perhaps it was a wish to perform the supreme sacrifice which led him to take this step. In any event, accompanied only by his aide-de-camp and by a wireless truck, he drove into the pocket with the intention of visiting the headquarters of the Seventh Army and of Panzer Group Eberbach.

Throughout the day the staff of C.-in-C. West attempted in vain to make radio contact with Kluge. A decision was urgently required on a most important matter. The Americans had reached Chartres. Were we therefore to make what arrangements we could for the defence of Paris, or was a new strategy to be at long last introduced? And how about our own location? St. Germain was uncomfortably close to the battle for the staff of a theatre commander, yet no higher staff was permitted to change its headquarters without first obtaining Hitler's approval. That evening, since neither Seventh Army nor the Panzer Group could give us any news of Kluge, we had no choice but to report him missing to the O.K.W.

What exactly had happened to Kluge during the hours when he had vanished in the Falaise pocket cannot now be established, since no reliable witness survives. It was later maintained that the monitoring service of the O.K.W. had picked up a radio message from Kluge to Patton concerning the possibility of a truce. All that is certain is that Kluge's wireless truck was destroyed by a bomb and that he himself finally arrived at Eberbach's headquarters late that evening on foot. As soon as the O.K.W. was informed of his reappearance there, Hitler sent out a most rudely phrased order: 'Now that Field-Marshal von Kluge has been found again, he will proceed at once from the Falaise pocket to the command post of



Fifth Panzer Army where he will resume control of the battle in progress.' This order did not reach Kluge at the time, since he was already driving straight back to his own headquarters at La Roche Guyon.

This strange incident was really the end of Kluge's command in the West. On the 16th of August he held a conference at St. Germain with the air force and naval commanders and with the armed forces commandant of Paris. He forbade fighting within the city and also ordered that essential installations, such as the water, gas and electricity supply, were not to be destroyed. German women and wounded were to be evacuated with all speed. Only the approaches to Paris, particularly the main roads, were to be fought for. He placed the Commandant of Paris under his direct personal command, in order to ensure that these orders were carried out.

Did he know that his fate was already decided? It was noticed that he said good-bye to each officer personally, and there was something melancholy in his manner of doing so. Then he returned to La Roche Guyon, where Field-Marshal Model arrived during the night of the 17th, bearing with him the order whereby he was to supersede Kluge as Commander-in-Chief West and as commander of Army Group B. He also brought Kluge a short letter from Hitler, in which Hitler said that Kluge had overtired himself during the weeks of battle and that Hitler had therefore decided to transfer him to the army reserve pool for a period of 'recuperation.'

Kluge took his dismissal quite calmly. That night he wrote a letter to Hitler imploring him to end the unequal battle in the West. Early on the 18th he said good-bye to his staff officers and set out by car for Germany. At Metz he ordered the driver to stop. He took poison there, and was carried to Metz hospital a dying man.

The O.K.W. ordered an immediate autopsy. The result of this post-mortem was signalled to the staff of C.-in-C. West, which had meanwhile moved to Verzy near Rheims, in the following laconic message signed by Jodl: 'Presence of potassium cyanide established beyond doubt.'

### *Escape from the Falaise Pocket: Crossing of the Lower Seine*

Field-Marshal Model, who had hitherto seen action only on the Eastern front, did not immediately grasp the full gravity of the situation in France and hoped that he might yet restore it. But he



was soon to realize the unimaginable effects of the enemy's air supremacy, the massive destruction in the rear areas, the impossibility of travelling along any major road in daylight without great peril, in fact the full significance of the invasion.

He decided to withdraw all the forces that he could behind the lower Seine, and to do this regardless of all other considerations. This meant a final attempt to extricate what troops could still be saved from the Falaise pocket, which was not yet quite sealed off, even if they had to leave their heavy weapons behind. At this time the pocket contained the staffs of Seventh Army, of Panzer Group Eberbach, of four corps headquarters and the remnants of some thirteen divisions. Although the enemy artillery now covered the remaining escape routes from the pocket, a break-out with armoured support succeeded during the night of August 21st-22nd. Those troops of Seventh Army which managed to escape were the first to be ferried across the lower Seine. They were then moved to rest areas in the north, where they were to be made ready for combat once again. The battle along the Seine between Paris and Rouen was now left almost entirely to Fifth Panzer Army.

### *The Invasion of Southern France*

While heavy fighting was going on in and about the Falaise pocket, the anticipated invasion of southern France took place, at this most critical moment for the German command.

Our weak air reconnaissance based on the Riviera had reported for some time that shipping was assembling in the Tunisian and Algerian ports. On the 13th and 14th heavy concentrations of transports were sighted moving north in convoy: by the afternoon of the 14th they were passing to the west of Corsica. Their arrival off the French Mediterranean coast on the 15th must therefore be reckoned with. Curiously enough, for some time rumours had been current among the French population that the Allies would land on August 15th, 'Napoleon's day.' We assumed that their objective would be the Rhône valley. Our senior command in the south was Army Group G.

On the morning of the 15th the staff of Commander-in-Chief West received a message from Army Group G. Airborne landings had taken place east of the Rhône, near Draguignan. Seaborne forces were attacking our coastal defences between St. Tropez-St. Raphael and Cannes. The message was not finished for at this point the line was cut, nor did we succeed in re-establishing



communication with Army Group G until the evening of the 15th. However, at about noon we did manage to arrange a temporary telephone link with Nineteenth Army, which was the army actually under attack. Nineteenth Army informed us that they in their turn had lost touch with the LXVIIth Corps, at Draguignan, and that it was assumed that this corps headquarters had been overrun by parachutists. After some early mishaps the seaborne invasion, supported by heavy air and naval bombardment, had succeeded in the bays of St. Tropez and St. Raphael. All that was so far known of the invading force was that it consisted of American and Free French troops.

Colonel-General Blaskowitz, the commander of Army Group G, had at this time only one mobile reserve division at his disposal, the excellent 11th Panzer Division. At the first indication that the invasion was imminent, this division had been moved from the valley of the Garonne to the Nîmes area in Nineteenth Army's sector. Since all the bridges across the Rhône had been destroyed by bombing, this was not an easy move. The division was now on the eastern bank of the river, where it provided Blaskowitz with his sole flank protection against an encircling move by the enemy through the mountains.

Our means of communication with Army Group G continued very poor indeed, but after two days we learned that part of the invading force was turning west towards Toulon, while the remainder was attempting to push northwards through the mountains on a line parallel to the Rhône valley.

Hitler's immediate reaction was to order the further reinforcement of the so-called 'Fortresses' of Toulon and Marseilles. This was yet another example of his infatuation with the idea of rigid defence, when what was in fact needed was a high degree of flexibility in our operations.

The position of the Nineteenth Army was clearly hopeless. With three corps, one of which had been eliminated, containing seven divisions, it was supposed to hold the long French Mediterranean coast. Army Group G was also responsible for the Biscay coast with First Army, which was even weaker than the Nineteenth. In view of this impossible state of affairs, the staff of Commander-in-Chief West attempted, not for the first time, to persuade the Supreme Command that southern France must now be evacuated. For the enemy's intentions were quite clear. By means of an advance up the Rhône valley he planned to cut off and encircle our Nineteenth Army while with other adequate forces he proposed to deal with the



Toulon and Marseilles fortresses. These last were indeed quickly mopped up in attacks launched against their over-extended landward fronts. The enemy's task was facilitated by the fact that they were overlooked by high ground in their rear.

On the 17th Hitler at last agreed to a partial evacuation of southern France. Even now he was only ready to take half measures, however, and he ordered Army Group G to establish an intermediary position running from Marseilles to the Loire, where it was to join hands with Army Group B. This order was quite impractical since the Allied columns streaming north were already behind this proposed line. After much insistence on the part of the staff of Commander-in-Chief West, Hitler at last agreed to modify this order. Army Group G was now to hold a line running from the Plateau de Langres to the Swiss frontier. The 'fortresses' on the Biscay coast, however, were not to be evacuated. Indeed they were to be reinforced. The rest of Army Group G set off on foot, without supplies, towards Dijon and the Loire. Remarkably enough most of the Army Group succeeded in carrying out this long march, only one column being lost en route.

The new pincer movement in the south had been a threat to the whole German front in the West, since it had seemed likely that Army Group G would be cut off during its fighting retreat up the Rhône valley, which would have meant that Army Group B's left flank was left dangling. Even today it seems almost miraculous that the Nineteenth Army should have managed, despite heavy enemy attacks, to march the length of the Rhône.

At last, on September 1st, Army Group G telephoned from Dijon to the staff of Commander-in-Chief West, now at Arlon in the Ardennes, that the withdrawal was for all intents and purposes completed.

In describing the operations of Army Group G, I have anticipated events on the front of Army Group B. There Seventh Army had, with great difficulty, finally completed its withdrawal across the lower Seine, on August 25th, and had marched off northwards. The north bank of the Seine between Paris and Rouen was now held by Fifth Panzer Army.

### *The Fall of Paris*

Farther to the east American armoured troops, with French tanks following behind, had advanced north-east through Rambouillet, had broken the German defensive ring south of Paris and,



on August 24th, had penetrated into the city itself as far as the Seine. To the south of Paris, along the central reaches of the river, the staff of the German First Army, which had been withdrawn from the Biscay coast, had been placed in command of the few available troops and was attempting to plug the gap between Paris and the Loire. This was not possible. The American armoured divisions soon established bridgeheads across the Seine and pushed on towards the east and north-east, with objectives apparently the Marne and Rheims.

Field-Marshal Model had ordered the withdrawal of Fifth Panzer Army across the lower Seine with instructions to take over the defence of the northern bank. With a tremendous effort, and with the sacrifice of vast quantities of equipment as a result of ceaseless air attacks, this crossing too was completed, much against expectations. The last armoured formation across was the 116th Panzer Division, in the Rouen area. The scene along the banks of the Seine was appalling. Hundreds of smashed vehicles and burned out tanks marked the route which the last German troops had taken. Nevertheless by throwing in all available troops, including anti-aircraft units, it was just possible to establish and hold a thin defensive line along the northern bank.

The Fifth Panzer Army still had at its disposal some eighty to a hundred tanks. Opposing it was a mass of enemy divisions constantly being brought up to strength both in man-power and equipment, while the enemy Air Force completely dominated each successive battlefield.

To the east of La Roche Guyon the Americans had already succeeded in establishing a small bridgehead over the river, which they now proceeded to enlarge and which, once Paris had fallen, must inevitably threaten the whole Seine position. Indeed Model himself had to evacuate his headquarters at La Roche Guyon in double-quick-time in order to avoid going 'into the bag.'

Paris itself was lost forever. Hitler might order counter-attacks to recapture the city—but what with? Finally, he even ordered the destruction of Paris by air attack and by the use of giant mortars. These instructions were no more carried out than had been his categorical order to blow the bridges in the city centre. The intelligent attitude of the two Chiefs of Staff (Lieutenant-General Speidel at Army Group B and General Blumentritt who was with the Commander-in-Chief West) had led to the nullification of these and similar orders.



Paris became henceforth the focal point on which the operations of the Allies now turned.

### *The New Situation*

The only German army still intact was General von Zangen's Fifteenth Army which manned the Channel defences and which faced towards the sea. This army was now in danger of being taken from the rear and being winkled out of its defences piecemeal by the advancing enemy.

The Seventh Army was utterly defeated; it could only produce a few combat groups, and that with difficulty. Fifth Panzer Army was fighting on both sides of the Oise. By forming mobile battle groups, it was attempting at most to delay the enemy's advance across the Seine and later across the Marne and Aisne. These battle groups, by fighting most brilliantly until they were literally cut to pieces, contributed to the fact that the Fifteenth Army could be extricated bit by bit from its fortifications and withdrawn northwards along the coast.

The situation east of Paris was extremely bleak. The weak forces available to our First Army were constantly broken through by the American armour. First at Rheims and then at Châlons-sur-Marne dangerous gaps were created. Had the Americans sent a strong armoured force southwards across the Plateau de Langres, the troops of Army Group G which were pouring back along the Rhône valley might well have been destroyed. This, surprisingly enough, the enemy failed to do.

### *The Absence of Prepared Defensive Positions*

The reader will frequently have wondered why there were no prepared defensive positions into which the army might have been withdrawn. Our Western army had been in France and the Low Countries for four years, and every sensible commander, making the necessary preparations against the possibility of a lost battle, always sees to it that an alternative defensive line is ready for occupation in his rear.

The answer is that in Hitler's eyes such foresight was a cardinal sin. Nobody was even allowed so much as to contemplate the possibility of a withdrawal, and the provision of a defensive line to the rear of the battle zone might, he felt, encourage such thoughts.



It is true that, as a 'top secret' matter, the possibility of forming a line running from the Somme along the line of the Marne and the Saône to the Swiss frontier in the neighbourhood of Pontarlier, had been investigated in theory. But no such line had been constructed and now there were no forces available either to build or to man it. In any event, it was too late, for this theoretical defensive line had already been overrun by the enemy in the Marne sector.

### *At Long Last a Directive*

Owing to the development of the campaign, Model had long ceased to be in any effectual fashion Commander-in-Chief West. He and his staff at Army Group B had to change their headquarters almost daily in order to avoid capture by the enemy. He could not exercise any practical influence on the decisions taken by the commander and staff of Army Group G which had been located in the Dijon area since September 1st.

The reports he sent to Hitler, and the demands he made of Supreme Headquarters, became more and more drastic, being based as they were on the experiences of Army Group B. He did not mince his words: apparently he could address Hitler in terms which would not have been allowed to any other senior commander.

In brief, towards the end of August he sent Hitler a teletyped message in which he stated that the position was untenable. In view of further heavy losses recently suffered by Fifth Panzer Army in the Mons area, he saw only one possible way of reconstituting a front line and reorganizing this army: this was withdrawal into the West Wall, the German pre-war frontier defences known abroad as the Siegfried Line. The reader should know that hitherto any mention of the West Wall had been absolutely taboo.

Nobody had yet dared make such a proposal to Hitler, but Model's outspoken message broke the spell. And in fact Hitler did now issue a directive to the effect that the Western armies should carry out a fighting withdrawal into the territory immediately in front of the West Wall and into the so-called Western Position, which skirted the frontier of Alsace-Lorraine, with the purpose of organizing a successful resistance there. This manœuvre might succeed in closing the gap between the left wing of the German First Army and the units of Army Group G which were still withdrawing northwards. What was not clear was how Fifteenth Army was to re-establish contact with the rest of the front.



The remnants of the Fifth Panzer and Seventh Armies had already been pushed back eastwards across the Meuse. First Army was in Luxembourg and along the Moselle. On September 3rd Brussels fell, and on the 4th British troops entered Antwerp—though they failed to extend their grasp on the town or to clear the approaches to the harbour. This explains why Fifteenth Army was able to escape intact across the mouth of the Scheldt and the islands, and managed to take up new positions behind the Albert Canal and the Meuse, even though their intended escape route through Lierre was cut.

On Hitler's orders the newly created First Parachute Army, under Colonel-General Student, was deployed with all speed along the Albert Canal in order that Holland at least, which for economic reasons was vital to the German war effort, should not fall into enemy hands.

### *The Return of Rundstedt*

Not only was the entire front ragged and brittle, the morale of the troops too had suffered during the long and difficult retreat. In fact a strong hand was badly needed at the helm. The unity of the front, which now included the Dutch water barriers, the West Wall and the adjoining Western Position, had to be re-established with all speed. When in the second half of August General Blumentritt suggested that Rundstedt be recalled, he knew that he was voicing the wishes of the fighting troops. Model, too, not only approved but welcomed this solution. So Rundstedt, now summoned from retirement for the third time, arrived at the headquarters of Commander-in-Chief West, located by this time at Ahrenberg opposite Coblenz, on September 5th. He was accompanied by his new Chief of Staff, General Siegfried Westphal, and all we staff officers were heartily glad to see him back.

### *The Condition of the West Wall*

Our decimated divisions—their strength had shrunk to an average of 1,000–1,500 men per regiment—perhaps believed that in the West Wall they would find a sturdy support. If so, they were greatly mistaken. During the past few years the West Wall had been systematically and thoroughly plundered for the sake of the Atlantic Wall and in August of 1944 its condition was pitiable. Only then did the Supreme Command take the necessary steps to make it once again defensible. But this task, instead of being



entrusted to the commanders of the Western armies, was given by Hitler to Himmler. By means of his so-called 'popular levies' he attempted to build defensive installations which turned out to be both technically and tactically inadequate to the demands of modern war and which served merely to waste man-power and labour. Finally, on Rundstedt's insistence, this system of control was scrapped, and a Senior Fortifications Command established which now set about methodically arming the West Wall in so far as this was possible. Since trained fortress troops were not available, the installations had for the time being to be manned in many cases by units of the Training Army.

It was Rundstedt's conviction that at this time the Allies could have broken through the West Wall whenever they wished. This was proved by an American armoured division which broke through north of the Moselle towards Bitburg and was only stopped then with the greatest difficulty. But to our great surprise the operations of the Allies came to a full stop in front of the West Wall: supply difficulties were presumably at the root of this.

### *Enemy Strength in September 1944*

We estimated the enemy forces facing the Germans in the West at 53 divisions, while a further 5 divisions were engaged against the 'fortresses' left behind in Brittany and on the Channel coast. In addition we reckoned that there were 34 divisions, including several airborne divisions, available for operations in Great Britain.

Theoretically we could count almost the same number of German divisions on the Western Front. However, the combat strength of these seldom amounted to much more than one-third of an Allied division. Our tank establishment was particularly low. In fact in combat strength we reckoned that the equivalent of 27 German were facing 53 Allied divisions at this time.

### *The Fortress Mania*

On Hitler's explicit order a number of pointless battles were still being fought by the 'fortresses' along the Channel and Atlantic coasts. These 'fortresses' were commanded by selected officers who had taken a special oath. It is hard to say where Hitler got this fortress idea from. It may be assumed that he believed the 'fortresses' would tie up so many enemy troops that they would



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be short of men when it came to fighting the final battle in Germany. What he overlooked was that as soon as the garrisons lost touch with the main German forces they and their equipment ceased to be of any value to us in our conduct of the war.

The crudest example of this foolish policy was provided by the Channel Isles, where an entire reinforced division was sitting idle. When Witzleben had been Commander-in-Chief West long ago, he described the commitment of this division to the Channel Isles as 'island madness.' With the exception of Brest, which the Allies needed urgently because of its harbour facilities, the enemy was content simply to keep these fortresses under observation, since they could do no harm to his conduct of the campaign as a whole. But they cost us between 160,000 and 200,000 men, together with their costly weapons and equipment.

A similar eccentricity was Hitler's habit of appointing 'battle commanders' at each and every important juncture or threatened locality. The officers assigned to those appointments were usually confronted with an impossible task. The 'emergency units' they commanded, consisting as they did of men drawn from every sort of rear-echelon unit, clerks, drivers, store-keepers and the rest, could not be expected with the best will in the world to fight successfully against tanks. The only result was a senseless squandering of man-power.

### *Aachen, Antwerp and Arnhem*

By the end of the first week in September the Western front was comparatively calm save for heavy pressure in the Aachen area. Here the Americans attacked ruthlessly, and by September 9th they had succeeded in fighting their way into several forward positions in the West Wall itself. This was the overture to three battles for Aachen which were to be fought during the coming autumn and winter. The capture of the city was intended to open the way for an advance to the Ruhr.

Meanwhile the enemy was much preoccupied with clearing the approaches to Antwerp, which he urgently needed as a port for his supplies. German forces still held the islands covering the mouth of the Scheldt. Each island had to be fought for in bitter battles, culminating in the battle for Walcheren. Finally the Walcheren dykes were breached by heavy air attack, and by November 8th those parts of it which were not submerged fell into Allied hands.



This long denial of Antwerp to the enemy as a base undoubtedly affected his conduct of the war at this time.

In connection with the Americans' Aachen offensive, the Allies launched large scale airborne forces against the Lower Rhine on September 17th, the first drop taking place on a beautiful, sunny autumn day. Most of the airborne troops were put down south of the river, behind our lines, but some were dropped on the farther bank. Heavy fighting developed. Field-Marshal Model displayed great energy in committing all the troops he could scrape together against the British 1st Airborne Division, north of the river at Arnhem. This division fought most gallantly, but by the end of the month Model's action had been crowned with success and the British division had ceased to exist.

Soon after the air landings, strong forces of the 1st Canadian Army joined in the ground attack. Though they managed to capture a certain amount of ground, they did not succeed in fulfilling their major intention, which was to secure a bridgehead across the Lower Rhine.

The enemy's only major positive achievement during the autumn of 1944 was the capture of the Nijmegen bridge, which remained in his possession. These operations, however, disclosed the enemy's future strategy. His point of main effort was clearly going to be the area between the Lower Rhine bend and Aachen, with primary objective the Ruhr and the North German plain, and ultimate objective Berlin.

### *Summing Up*

Speaking in private, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, Hitler remarked that there were only two men whom he feared: Churchill and Stalin. He had not then heard of Eisenhower, or he might well have added a third name to the list of his fatal enemies.

It is a matter of irony that Eisenhower, the servant of the great democracies, was given full powers of command over an armed force consisting of all three services. With us, living under a dictatorship where unity of command might have been taken for granted, each of the services fought its own battle. Neither Rundstedt nor Rommel, try though they might, succeeded in changing this state of affairs and creating a unified command. The result was that the German Army fought single-handed against all the armed forces of the Allies. Since these latter were in every respect superior to our



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army, defeat was inevitable. This defeat was made all the more certain by Hitler's insistence on an absolutely rigid defence, on the holding of every square yard of ground to the last man and the last round. We suffered between five and six hundred thousand casualties, including the troops in the fortresses, and lost the whole of France and Belgium in consequence, while Germany's defence was forced back onto the German frontier.

During August of 1944 we often wondered why the enemy command did not immediately push forwards towards the east across the Moselle, in the Metz area, or, alternatively, why they did not attempt to cut off Army Group G as it retreated north. Later developments, however, explained Eisenhower's strategy. His targets were the Ruhr, the North German plain and Berlin. The preliminary to these must be the capture of Aachen and of the bend in the Lower Rhine. A glance at the map will show that it is a straight line from Normandy to Berlin, via Aachen and the Ruhr. Had his strategy succeeded in the autumn of 1944, there would have been no need to fight for the West Wall, nor for the Central and Upper Rhine, all of which would have fallen automatically.

The Allies' decision to halt opposite the West Wall and the Western Position gave us a breathing-space, which we exploited to the full. The German Supreme Command now did all in its power to make the Western Front strong once more. Despite the fighting at Aachen, reinforcements were rushed to the whole front, the panzer divisions were once again provided with tanks, the artillery was strengthened, and Rundstedt, with the support of his most capable Chief of Staff, took firm control of the formations under his command. In their hands the armies were reorganized and became a fighting instrument again. Army Group G was slowly withdrawn from the Châlon-sur-Saône area and, joining hands with the First Army on its right, held the sector of the upper Moselle to the Swiss frontier. Against all expectations we had succeeded in recreating a firm and unified front.

Thus were the armies aligned when winter came, with the British Twenty-first Army Group facing north from the coast to the Meuse, the American Twelfth Army Group facing east from there to Alsace, and on its right the American-French Sixth Army Group stretching to the Swiss frontier. A new American army, the Ninth, was reported forming east of Paris, where Eisenhower had established his headquarters. Thus did the Battle of France end: the Battle for Germany was about to begin.



# THE END DRAWS NEAR

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

WHILE, as we have just read, the Allied offensive in the West advanced with seven-league boots, in Italy the German forces had succeeded in foiling the enemy's attempt to break through on a large scale. This achievement was all the more remarkable in that Kesselring's troops were in danger not only from the enemy in front but also, as we shall see, from the rear. After renewed attacks by General Clark's Fifth United States Army in the general area of Florence in August and by the British Eighth Army along the Adriatic coast in the following month, the German front remained more or less stabilized until the spring of 1945. It ran from a point near La Spezia on the Tyrrhenian Sea, then south of Modena and Bologna, thus blocking the roads across the Etruscan Apennines, and on to the Lake of Comaccio and the Adriatic. The loss of southern France as a result of the Franco-American landings in August had necessitated the creation of a subordinate front to block the passes through the Alps along the Franco-Italian frontier. This task was entrusted to the troops of the 'Neo-Fascist Republic' and to German units which together formed the Army of Liguria under command of Marshal Rudolfo Graziani, the conqueror of Abyssinia and Mussolini's last War Minister. In the months to come heavy losses on the Western and Eastern Fronts led to the removal of several high-grade divisions from Army Group Italy, which was much weakened in consequence.

In addition to the air battles, the Second World War saw another new development in warfare. This was the activities of the Partisans, which were on a scale far surpassing what had hitherto been associated with 'Guerrillas.' Particularly in the Eastern territories and in the Balkans, Partisans, often in very large formations, kept the German Army occupied for years on end. In the vast expanses of Russia the Partisans at times controlled whole districts; according to the terms of the Hague Convention, they did not count as combatants, and their most usual method of operation was to attack from ambush. Supply routes, both rail and road, were cut without warning and special security measures became necessary. All soldiers will react with extreme violence to underhand attacks by apparently harmless civilians, male and female. This explains why, in defence against the Partisans whose



methods were extremely brutal, our troops often went too far. In Yugoslavia large parts of the Yugoslav Army had succeeded in escaping into the mountains and thus avoiding captivity. They provided the cadres for the divisions and brigades of the Partisan army which was to be created later and which was regularly supplied with war materials by the Allies. The military significance of Partisan warfare can best be demonstrated by the fact that in Yugoslavia and Greece alone several Italian armies and a German army group of approximately twenty divisions were not only tied down by these irregular forces but even had, on occasion, the greatest difficulty in keeping their vital lines of communications open.

In Italy Partisan activity had begun, on a very limited scale, during the winter of 1943-44. In the spring of 1944 it increased in intensity and reached its peak during the German retreat, when it became a serious menace to our soldiers. The Italian Partisans and the men of the French Maquis were largely Communist-controlled. In Belgium and Scandinavia the underground forces relied in general on passive resistance until the autumn of 1944: only then did they too begin to become active.

On the Eastern Front, during the summer and autumn of 1944, the German armies suffered the greatest disasters of their history which even surpassed the catastrophe of Stalingrad. On June 22nd the Russian offensive against Army Group Centre was begun: the Russians had amassed vast quantities of weapons and munitions for this operation. Despite the warnings of the General Staff the sector held by Army Group Centre had been dangerously weakened in the interests of the army group to its south, which was where Hitler expected the first attack to come in. The enemy broke through Army Group Centre at numerous points, and since Hitler had strictly forbidden an elastic defence, that army group was annihilated. Only scattered remnants of thirty divisions escaped death or Soviet captivity. It is truly astonishing that despite this fearful loss of life, it was once again possible to create a new front, though this was now very thin indeed.

In the far north, too, the hour of disaster struck. On June 9th a large Russian offensive was launched against the courageous Finno-German Army of Lapland. The Head of the Finnish State, Marshal Mannerheim, soon felt that for the sake of his people he had no choice but to break off hostilities and sue for peace. In the Baltic States Army Group North was cut off as a result of the destruction of Army Group Centre. Once again Hitler's obstinacy prevented a sensible solution. He insisted that the two isolated armies remain in Courland, and even refused to



countenance the withdrawal by sea of individual units. Nor was that all. In mid-July the Russians attacked Army Group North Ukraine, broke through to Lwow, and forced the Germans back to the Carpathians and the Vistula. They even succeeded in securing a bridgehead across that river at Baronov, where they were to mount their great offensive in January of 1945.

Throughout this summer of 1944, it seemed as though the chain of disasters would never end. On August 1st the Poles in Warsaw rose against the German occupation: this uprising could only be put down with the greatest difficulty, and that largely thanks to the refusal of Soviet aid on which the Poles relied in vain. On August 24th Rumania suddenly capitulated: this move took the Germans by surprise and resulted in the loss of large parts of Army Group South Ukraine. Bulgaria followed Rumania's example. Hungary, which had been occupied by German troops during the previous March in order to prevent any such development there, was now directly threatened. By mid-October the Russians were approaching Kosice in Slovakia, the capital of the Carpatho-Ukraine, and were outside Szegedin and Nagy Varad in the plains of Hungary, only some sixty miles from Budapest. At the same time the Slovaks rose against the Germans.

In the north, too, the Russian offensive continued to progress. By the end of August the Red Army had entered East Prussia. Now the public learned for the first time of the abominable atrocities perpetrated by the Russian soldiers upon the civilian population. At Hitler's headquarters near Rastenburg the guns were clearly audible, so close was the front-line.

By October the general situation made it essential that the evacuation of the Balkans be begun if the divisions down there were not to be written off as a total loss. After long and difficult marches across mountains where roads were a rarity, under constant attack by the Partisans and later by the Allied air forces, German troops from the Peloponnese, Albania and Yugoslavia at last succeeded in regaining contact with our Eastern armies. Owing to the lack of shipping the garrisons of Crete and Rhodes had to be left behind.

Germany was now plunging headlong towards the abyss. Realizing this, a group of responsible men whose honourable motives were above question, men drawn from every class, profession and party, attempted to carry out a *coup d'état* which had long been prepared. Famous soldiers of high rank stood at their head. It was high time that an end were put to the disasters which Hitler's crimes had brought upon the Germans and the other nations of Europe, and this, they realized,



must be done by Germans in Germany. But the attempt to assassinate him on July 20th failed. Hitler exacted a frightful revenge, particularly upon the officers who had been implicated. Many hundreds of men who had taken part in the attempted *coup d'état*, or who had simply known what was being planned, were subjected to a mock trial and handed over to the executioners: they were hanged. The army was now rendered completely powerless. Himmler took over command of the Replacement Army. He thus had full authority within Germany. A great number of army divisions were reformed as 'People's Grenadier Divisions' and these too were subordinate to Heinrich Himmler. The reign of terror in Germany reached its climax.

In order to appreciate the psychological condition which existed at this time, it is important to realize that the majority of the Germans both at home and at the front had not yet recognized Hitler as the criminal he was. Despite deep sympathy for the victims of July 20th, the overwhelming mass of the German people still regarded it as their plain duty to accept their fate in silence and to go on working, suffering and dying for the sake of Germany's war effort. They saw no alternative. Only this can explain the fact that, despite wellnigh non-stop Allied air-raids, the railways continued to function almost normally until the winter of 1944-45, while German arms production reached its peak during the autumn of 1944. From then on it began to decline, first slowly and, after the loss of the Upper Silesian industrial area, rapidly.

It was not only the Army which sacrificed itself. The Air Force and the Navy, fighting a hopeless battle against overwhelming odds, did likewise. The Luftwaffe had lost its best crews in the East: attempting to gain at least some respite for the ground troops, the Air Force had been constantly overstrained and the pilots and crews had given their uttermost. The most valuable lives, including those of instructors, had been sacrificed in the attempts to keep Stalingrad and the other encirclements supplied by air. In the Mediterranean, too, the élite of the Luftwaffe had been recklessly sacrificed. Another factor was also decisive to the course of the air war. The correct technical conclusions had not been drawn from the defeat of the German Air Force in the Battle of Britain. What was then clearly needed was the immediate production of a high-class fighter plane which would provide the answer to the coming Allied air offensive. Instead experimentation continued for years on end. The result was that during the winter of 1944-45 the old Messerschmitt 109 was still the backbone of Germany's fighter force. The greater part of the blame for this error, so costly in lives, must be ascribed to Marshal of the Reich Goering, who proved



totally incapable of carrying out his functions as Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe: it must, however, be added that he was hampered by Hitler's constant interference in the activities of his department.

The Navy, too, fought heroically, but the successes which it now bought at the cost of such enormous sacrifices were extremely slight. The fast modern U-boats, with the Snorkel apparatus, came too late. The U-boat arm's casualties, 673 boats with crews totalling 30,000 men, speak for themselves. The German Navy, confronted with a task far beyond its means, lost 2,600 vessels of all types during the course of the war.

The German Western armies, after the loss of France, Belgium and large parts of Holland, were granted a brief respite when at last they reached the German frontiers, for the Allies did not press on at once. Thus what had seemed most unlikely turned out to be possible after all, and a new defensive front was created. This was principally based upon the old West Wall, which was feverishly rearmed with such weapons as were available. The months of September, October and November saw further reverses in the West. Aachen was the first large German town to fall into enemy hands: the old imperial capital, once the seat of Charlemagne, was captured by the Americans. Lorraine and most of Alsace, together with the fortresses of Metz and Strasbourg, were also lost. But despite all the attempts of the Americans to break through, particularly in the Aachen area, the front held.

Meanwhile, in circumstances of the greatest secrecy, an operation was being prepared which was to astonish not only the enemy but also the population of Germany. This was the so-called Ardennes Offensive. This last attack to be launched by a German army group in the Second World War is described in the next chapter by the man who commanded the army which spearheaded the attack and which advanced almost as far as Dinant on the Meuse.

PART SIX

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# The Ardennes

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*General*

HASSO VON MANTEUFFEL



HASSO-ECCARD VON MANTEUFFEL was on the staff of the Inspectorate of Panzer troops before the war. He was promoted Colonel in November 1940, and in 1943 he commanded a division in Tunisia. At the end of that year he took over the 7th Panzer Division and soon afterwards, in February 1944, he was promoted Lieutenant-General on appointment as commander of the 'Grossdeutschland' Panzer Division. He was appointed commander of Fifth Panzer Army in 1944 and in March 1945 commander of Third Panzer Army in East Prussia. General von Manteuffel holds the Oakleaf Cluster with Swords and Diamonds to the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. He is now 58 years of age.





GENERAL HASSO VON MANTEUFFEL

## *The Secret Conference*

‘GENTLEMEN, before opening the conference I must ask you to read this document carefully and then sign it with your full names.’

The date was November 3rd, 1944, and I had assumed that the conference would be merely a routine meeting of the three army commanders who held the northern sector of the Western Front under Field-Marshal Model's Army Group B. The conference took place at Model's headquarters, and in addition to the army commanders, the chief of the Armed Forces Command Staff, Colonel-General Jodl, was also present. But a glance at the document, which was now passed round, quickly showed that this was to be an unusual meeting. Each officer present had to pledge himself to preserve complete silence concerning the information which Jodl intended to divulge to us: should any officer break this pledge, he must realize that his offence would be punishable by death. I had frequently attended top secret conferences presided over by Hitler at Berchtesgaden or at the 'Wolf's Lair' both before and after July 20th, 1944, but this was the first time that I had seen a document such as the one which I now signed. It was clear that something most unusual was afoot.

Indeed it was a most remarkable speech which Jodl now made to the small group of senior officers. The Field-Marshal von Rundstedt and Model had been put in the picture a few days earlier, through their respective Chiefs of Staff. My astonishment, as I listened to Jodl, was all the greater since for the last few weeks my Fifth Panzer Army had been deeply engaged in very heavy and critical defensive battles in the Heinsberg-Aachen area, to the south of Roermond. On October 21st Aachen had fallen. It was to be assumed that the Americans would exploit their success and that we might expect further heavy attacks to be launched against the front of Fifth Panzer Army.

And yet the chief of the Armed Forces Command Staff now produced a draft plan, together with sketch maps, for 'a decisive offensive' to be launched against the Western Allies from the sector of Army Group B. Jodl seemed overtired and was, as soon became



clear, in an irritable frame of mind. The constraint which he felt in imparting this plan to us was apparent by his repeated statement that everything he now said was the result of 'an unalterable decision on the part of the Führer.'

During the previous August Hitler had at last realized that our Western armies were beaten and that all we could hope to gain by further fighting in front of the West Wall was time. He then decided that the course of operations must be so organized that our eventual withdrawal into the West Wall would serve as the preliminary to a counter-offensive. Even during the most critical periods of the battle in France and the Low Countries, he had repeatedly ordered local and limited counter-attacks with the purpose of wresting the initiative from the enemy. But during September he had come to see that these smaller counter-attacks, which were constantly being mounted, did not and could not produce the circumstances which would permit the launching of a large-scale counter-offensive. At no point along the Western Front had we, in fact, succeeded in regaining the initiative. All that could be done with the limited forces at our disposal was to plug the gaps which appeared in our thinly held lines. It was therefore decided to bring up fresh formations, and, after breaking through the enemy's positions, to commit panzer forces and make the battle mobile once again, 'in order,' we were now told, 'in open country to bring about a decisive turning-point in this theatre of operations and indeed in the war as a whole.'

He had ordered an appreciation made of enemy strength and of the forces, both in men and material, available inside Germany for despatch to the Western Front. On the basis of these figures, Hitler decided that it was possible to reverse the current of events. What had proved impossible in front of the West Wall was to be done by means of an attack from the West Wall. Jodl went on to say that the attack which Hitler had ordered was to be launched on that sector where 'a break-through by the forces available would be a guaranteed certainty. In view of the thinness of the enemy forces in the Ardennes, the Supreme Command had decided that the Monschau-Echternach sector is the most suitable. The enemy has suffered heavily in his offensive battles, his reserves are in general located immediately behind the front, and his supply situation is strained. The enemy line is thin, nor does he expect the Germans to attack anywhere, least of all in this sector. Therefore by full exploitation of the element of surprise, in weather conditions which



will keep his Air Force grounded, we can reckon on achieving a rapid break-through. This will permit mobile operations by our panzer forces, which will swiftly seize the bridgeheads over the Meuse between Liège and Namur, and then, by-passing Brussels to the east, will drive irresistibly for Antwerp.'

It was assumed that once they were over the Meuse our panzer forces would cut the rearward communications and supply lines of the United States First Army, which were believed to follow the Meuse valley. As soon as our tanks reached the Brussels-Antwerp area the communication and supply lines of the British Twenty-first Army Group would be similarly threatened and, with the capture of Antwerp, cut. The enemy had not yet been able fully to exploit the potentialities of this great port, so vital for his future operations on the Continent. He would soon be doing so, however, and could then be expected to bring the great weight of men and material, which would flow through that port, to bear upon us. However, should the German Army capture Antwerp, a situation would exist in which we could attack the forces of the First United States Army and the 21st British Army Group, now isolated from their sources of supply, from all sides. This would result in the defeat of twenty-five to thirty Allied divisions: success would lead to the destruction or capture of vast quantities of war material of all sorts accumulated in that area for normal operations and particularly for the enemy's forthcoming attack against the West Wall.

Having thus outlined the military purpose of the operation, Jodl went on to describe the other advantages which Hitler expected to reap from its success. Allied plans would be put out of joint for a long time ahead. The Allies would have to carry out a basic re-examination of their policy. The delay thus caused would lead their military leaders to postpone taking the necessary counter-measures. Hitler himself, in the course of a conversation which I had with him on December 2nd, amplified these remarks of Jodl's. He told me that he was aware of a certain disparity between the distant objective of Antwerp and the forces which were to capture it. However, he said, this was the time to put everything on one throw of the dice, 'for Germany needs a pause to draw breath.' Even a partial success, he believed, would retard the plans of the Allies by eight to ten weeks, which would give Germany the respite she required. Temporary stabilization on the Western Front would enable the Supreme Command to move forces from there to the threatened



central sector of the Eastern Front. Hitler believed that a successful operation now would have a great effect not only on German morale, but also on public opinion in the Allied countries and within their armed forces. 'I am determined,' Hitler continued, 'to carry out the operation regardless of risks: even if the impending Allied attacks on either side of Metz and towards the Ruhr should result in great loss of territory and of fortified positions, I am nevertheless determined to go ahead with this attack.'

This statement reveals the full obstinacy with which he clung to this project of his. For its sake he was even prepared to sacrifice what had hitherto been his guiding principle, namely, that no square yard of ground must ever be surrendered.

To return to the conference of November 3rd, Jodl now described the forces which Hitler believed would be adequate to carry out his plan. These consisted in part of forces at present or recently engaged on our front, which were to be withdrawn, rested and re-equipped, and in part of new formations being set up within Germany. These fresh forces, however, could only be made available if Hitler were to authorize a basic change in our general conduct of the war, and this he repeatedly refused to do. He hesitated to make any strategic changes or to issue the necessary instructions to those fronts which were not directly concerned with his forthcoming offensive. He lacked the firmness of purpose needed to withdraw forces from the Luftwaffe, Navy and Replacement Army earmarked for future operations in other theatres, even though these operations could never take place were the planned offensive in the West to fail. The dictator, in his decline, could not or would not order the concentration of effort necessary to create a force strong enough to smash the enemy front.

Jodl outlined the tasks of the armies which were to take part in the offensive, as follows:

*Sixth SS Panzer Army*, under command of Colonel-General of the SS Sepp Dietrich, was to seize the Meuse crossings on both sides of Liège, as well as those over its tributary the Vesare; it was to create a strong defensive front in the eastern fortifications of Liège; it was then to cross the Albert Canal between Maastricht and Antwerp, and finally it was to advance into the area north of Antwerp.

*Fifth Panzer Army*, under my command, was to cross the Meuse between Amey, which is west of Liège, and Namur; then it was to cover the rear of 6th SS Panzer Army against attack by enemy



reserves coming from the West along a line Antwerp-Brussels-Namur-Dinant.

*Seventh Army*, under the trusty General Brandenberger, was responsible for covering the southern and south-western flanks of the operation. His objective was the Meuse and its tributary, the Semois. He was to gain contact with the Moselle front east of Luxembourg. By means of demolitions, his army was to gain time for the construction of a strong defensive line farther back.

Furthermore, we were informed that it was the intention of the Supreme Command to co-ordinate an attack by Army Group H, to the north, with that of Army Group B in the Ardennes. This was to be launched from the sector of the XIIth SS Panzer Corps, between Sittard and Geilenkirchen. It was intended to hit the flank of the strong enemy force which might be expected to move against the right of the Sixth SS Panzer Army.

Strengths were to be as follows:

*Sixth SS Panzer Army*, four SS panzer and five infantry divisions.

*Fifth Panzer Army*, four panzer and three infantry divisions.

*Seventh Army*, six infantry divisions and one panzer division.

Jodl could not say what forces would be allotted to the supporting attack from the area of the XIIth SS Panzer Corps.

Reserves, at the disposal of the Supreme Command, were to consist of three or four panzer and three or four infantry divisions.

Total number of divisions to be engaged in the operation was therefore between twenty-eight and thirty.

The break-through along the entire front was to be carried out by the infantry divisions. The attack was to be so mounted as to guarantee, or rather to make it as certain as it calculably could be, that the penetrations of the enemy positions were achieved with all speed, so that the panzer troops might in their turn be committed early in the operation. The armour was then to exploit the shock effect of the assault and drive through the gaps made by the infantry. It was to head due west, deep into the enemy's rear. It was essential that neither panzer army hesitate before the Meuse was reached. They were simply to by-pass strongly held villages or defensive positions, nor were they to worry if their flanks should become uncovered. These were tactics which had been frequently employed with great success on the Eastern Front.

At this conference Jodl announced the date for the launching of the attack as November 25th. The phase of the moon would be suitable, for it would then be new. The preceding dark period would



have provided cover for the movements of the troops up to their jumping-off positions, particularly against the enemy's air reconnaissance.

When Jodl had finished, I was the first of the commanders asked to express my views. Turning to Field-Marshal von Rundstedt, I said that naturally I could not give any sort of final opinion at the present stage. I said that I should certainly do my utmost to reach the Meuse and, if conditions were favourable, to cross it. I thought that this could be achieved if the promises of the Supreme Command were implemented. But I can still recall how horrified Jodl was when I went on to say that I did not see how the attack could possibly be launched successfully before December 15th. Jodl said that Hitler would never agree to that.

Then Field-Marshal Model gave us his views on a possible alternative solution. In view of the forces likely to be available for the operation, and in view of the circumstances and facts to which I had referred, a modification of the proposed plan might offer better prospects of quick success. He suggested that instead of both panzer armies driving west across the Meuse, they might turn north-west or north once they were through the enemy lines and out in the open. Then Fifth Panzer Army's left flank would be resting on the Meuse, while Seventh Army could cover the southern flank of the operation. Meanwhile the German Fifteenth Army should attack from the Sittard sector, creating a northern pincer which would meet the pincer driving up from the south somewhere near Tongres, which is north-west of Liège. This pincer movement would encircle the Anglo-American forces in the sector Sittard-Monschau, forces which he estimated at between twenty-five and thirty divisions. Should the situation develop favourably, the attack on Antwerp as planned by the Armed Forces Command Staff could then still take place.

The difference between the plan as put forward by the Armed Forces Command Staff and Model's plan was that the former envisaged the use of limited forces to achieve a very large objective, whereas Model proposed to use much stronger forces to achieve an objective which, initially, would be smaller. This latter plan might well have enabled us to reach the Meuse. This would have given us an opportunity, after rapid regrouping, to clear up the Aachen area, a realizable second objective within the area of our attack. It is worth noting that this train of thought involved a different allotment of forces and therefore a new point of main



effort. There was still time to consider this. The result of the conference was the proposed plan for the so-called 'Small Solution' which was prepared by the staff of Commander-in-Chief West and followed almost exactly Model's outline.

As for the enemy, my first opinion was that my own army need not anticipate a strong reaction coming from the north on the east bank of the Meuse. This would also apply, more or less, to the Sixth SS Panzer Army. We believed that only insignificant reserves were located behind the enemy's line divisions. Therefore, provided we succeeded in breaking through the enemy's defences before he had time to bring up his reserves, there was the prospect that we would face only slight opposition in our advance to the Meuse. I was far more worried by the possibility of strong enemy counter-action from the south. Here he could bring in reserves from the Champagne district by way of Rheims-Châlons-Charleville-Sédan-Montmédy, or he could move up part of Patton's Third United States Army which held the southern sector of the front. In either case, should they succeed in advancing east of the Meuse, we could anticipate strong enemy forces, or even the bulk of his forces, being in operation in the Bastogne area by the evening of the third day of our attack. The enemy had at his disposal a first class road network, high mobility, and ample fuel supplies: his reserves must therefore be expected to appear on the scene swiftly.

It followed that by the evening of D + 3 Seventh Army must have established a strong defensive line, reaching far to the west, before the arrival of these reserves. It seemed to me that Seventh Army was neither strong nor mobile enough to do this and also lacked sufficient armour.

This appreciation of mine exactly agreed with that of Seventh Army. I was pleased to discover that Model, too, fully shared my point of view. The army group commander was as worried as I was, though he kept his anxieties completely to himself. It was typical of Model that he devoted all his energies to hastening the preparations for the attack, lest delay further increase the risks inherent in the operation. Though commanding an army group, Model never lost sight of the practical problems of the men who must actually lead the troops nor of the needs of the troops themselves. He was at all times prepared to listen to suggestions, provided they were factually justified and presented to him after careful deliberation. The demands he made on his troops were heavy, though not as heavy as those he made on himself: in both cases a certain



moderation might at times have been advantageous. But it was, and indeed still is, incomprehensible to me why Model did not try to harmonize the points of view of the two assault armies. He often expressed his anxieties to me in the period preceding the attack, and from a command point of view he regarded the massing of all the SS panzer divisions in a single SS Panzer Army as a mistake. But Hitler wished to see an SS Panzer Army competing with a regular Panzer Army! Model either could not or would not bring the SS army staff to co-operate closely with mine or to accept our point of view in such matters as jumping-off times and many another problem which I regarded as vitally important. Experience had proved the danger of such faulty co-ordination in the past. Future events were to show that I was right.

### *Hitler's Berlin Conference*

One chance to harmonize the views of the two assault armies was offered by a conference over which Hitler presided and which took place in Berlin on December 2nd. Model, Sepp Dietrich and I were summoned to the Reich Chancellery, where we found General of Cavalry Westphal, then Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief West. Hitler had already expounded his views to Westphal on an earlier occasion.

Model was, as always, well prepared and had been well provided with the necessary factual bases for his arguments by his most competent First Operations Officer. He had a great day. Everyone in the large conference hall had to acknowledge his ability as he delivered his masterly summary. Even Hitler failed to interrupt him, and was visibly impressed. Model expressed his point of view with complete frankness and great force. Yet the results of the conference were unsatisfactory. The basic plan was in no way modified. The major problems remained unresolved. Antwerp was still the objective, and Hitler quite refused to discuss the 'Small Solution,' which he referred to as the 'Half Solution.' No decision was taken concerning the supporting attack by Fifteenth Army on the northern wing. Nor was there any question of reinforcing Seventh Army as had been envisaged in the original plan. Finally it remained open to doubt whether the promised and still outstanding troops and supplies would in fact arrive in time before the attack was launched. There was no way of discovering whether steps had been taken to mislead the enemy on other sectors of the



front, nor, if so, to what extent this was being done. There was also the question of tactical manœuvres on these other sectors intended to pin down enemy forces there: this important aspect was likewise ignored.

I was not particularly surprised, when the seven-hour conference was at last over, that Hitler engaged me in a further conversation of one and a half hour's duration. He had obviously noticed that neither I nor Model was satisfied with the results of the discussion. Alone with him, save for the presence of one of his adjutants, I was able to advance certain minor proposals, but these did not lead to much change. At this date he was incapable of realizing that he no longer commanded the army which he had had in 1939 or 1940, or at the beginning of the Russian campaign. It was not that his soldiers now lacked determination or drive: what they lacked was weapons and equipment of every sort. The final question which I put him was to ask him what I should tell my troops when they enquired concerning the part the Luftwaffe was going to play in the forthcoming operation: in our sector of the front we never saw or heard a German aeroplane these days. He replied:

'The Luftwaffe is being deliberately held back. Goering has reported that he has three thousand fighters available for the operation. You know Goering's reports. Discount one thousand, and that still leaves a thousand to work with you and a thousand for Sepp Dietrich.'

### *Preparations for the Offensive*

The fighting in the Aachen sector served as an excellent cover both to hide the intentions of our High Command and also to conceal the massing of troops for our planned offensive. The divisions were assembled behind the Aachen front, so that the enemy would assume that they were going to be fed into the battle there or alternatively that they were to be used to counter-attack an eventual American break-through to the Rhine. Our troop movements were so organized as to strengthen this misapprehension on the part of the enemy.

The German commanders knew the terrain in the Ardennes well. We had advanced across it in 1940 and retreated through it only a few months before. We knew its narrow, twisting roads and the difficulties, not to say dangers, they could cause an attacking force, particularly in winter and in the bad weather conditions which



were an essential prerequisite to the opening of our operation. The main roads contained many hairpin bends, and were frequently built into steep hillsides. To get the guns of the artillery and flak units as well as the pontoons and beams of the bridging engineers around these sharp corners was a lengthy and difficult business. The guns and trailers had to be disconnected and then dragged around the corner by a capstan mechanism, naturally one at a time. Vehicles could not pass one another on these roads. In the event of air attack there could be no question of taking cover in the scrub or forests that flanked the roads, since the sides of the hills into which they were built were far too steep. Furthermore, the majority of our vehicles, including our few tractors, were in poor shape: even if the terrain permitted it, most of them were incapable of cross-country travel. We must expect a high proportion of breakdowns in vehicles, tanks and guns.

The standard of training was no longer sufficiently high in all the divisions to allow any confidence in their performance when pitted against an enemy, superior in numbers and equipment, who had recently been rested and who was extremely well fed. Every senior commander was aware of these shortcomings on the part of our troops. What is more, the army had undertaken no large-scale offensive operations since 1942. To make good this lack of experience in offence, it would have been necessary to withdraw the divisions from the front, rest them, and give them a thorough training in favourable conditions. Hitler saw to it that the majority of his SS divisions did have such rest and training, but this was not the lot of the army divisions. The infantry divisions which were to play so decisive a part in the assault could only give their replacements partial and, it must be admitted, inadequate training for the task that lay ahead of them. For this the divisional staffs were in no way to blame.

In modern war, with its insistence on technology and on equipment, a good supply system is an essential requirement for victory in battle. On the German side, during this phase of the war, the main logistical problem was how to move the supplies. The mounting bomber offensive against the German rail network meant that supplies had to be unloaded ever farther and farther back from the front line. The Rhine had, in this connection, become a positive nuisance to us. West of the Rhine there were only a few stretches of railway which could still be used, and many of those were repeatedly damaged to such an extent that the trains broke down or



had to be routed around lengthy detours. The numerous tunnels were used as unloading points, or as refuges for the trains in case of air attack. But eventually the tunnels were all filled with trains, so that while whole stretches of line were blocked by bomb-damage, others were blocked by trains. In either case, of course, urgent supplies were held up. Furthermore, the railway administration, in its desire to give maximum service, sent as many trains as possible westwards when darkness fell or the weather promised a respite from air attack. Chaos sometimes resulted and not infrequently whole trains were lost for hours on end. The Quartermaster General would have to send out an officer to hunt for the vanished train, which was usually to be found stuck in some tunnel or other. The officer would then have to organize a column of trucks into which the supplies could be shifted. This was no easy task. In fact the whole business of supplying the troops was tremendously difficult, and protracted delays were commonplace. Even the most urgently required supplies failed to arrive on time. From the very beginning of the offensive the troops lived from hand to mouth. When the weather cleared on December 23rd, and the Allied Air Force became active once again, this state of affairs was aggravated by intensive attacks on the supply routes in the immediate vicinity of the front until eventually it was impossible to bring up supplies at all in daylight.

Our security measures were carried out with exceptional thoroughness. The difficulties inherent in concealing the preparations we were making had to be accepted as the price of secrecy. Camouflage and deception were both employed extensively and they complemented one another. For camouflage purposes my army staff, when at last on November 25th we were withdrawn from the front and moved into the Eifel to prepare the assault, was renamed 'Field Rifle Command for special employment.' Panzer officers discarded their distinctive uniform and dressed as infantrymen. In order that the presence of troops in the forests should not be betrayed by the smoke of their cookers and heating stoves, charcoal was issued them. The horsedrawn guns of the artillery and of the flak troops, as well as the engineers' bridging material, were assembled behind a 'Block Line for M.T.' which lay some five miles in the rear of our main defensive position. When they were finally moved up, in the dark, night fighters flew up and down along the front in order to drown the noise of the road movement. The hooves of the horses were encased in straw when they moved along



metalled roads. Whenever a vehicle had to leave the road, great care was taken to ensure that any tell-tale wheel tracks were brushed away. In order to mislead the enemy, elements of the newly arrived divisions marched off northwards and eastwards during the hours of daylight according to a fixed plan.

The thoroughness of these deceptive and camouflage measures succeeded, when the time came, in obtaining us complete surprise. The enemy had not reckoned with the possibility of an attack on this scale, let alone in such a countryside and at so unpropitious a season. From the security point of view the only glaring omissions were the preparations of all sorts carried out on, and in some cases east of, the Rhine. These stocks were to cause us considerable trouble. I had warned Hitler in ample time and had most urgently requested that he issue a personal order allotting sufficient carrying space from the 'Speer columns' to move them. He noted what I said, but the vehicles, which were more urgently required along other sectors of the Western front, were not forthcoming in sufficient numbers.

As for the morale of the troops, it had of course suffered during the defeats of the previous summer. Recently, however, it had improved again as a result of the successful defensive battle fought along the River Roer against vastly superior enemy forces. Our soldiers knew that they were keeping, in their turn, the historic Watch on the Rhine. They were well aware that it was their duty to secure the rear while their brothers and cousins kept the Red Army from invading Germany in the East. They admired and respected the civilian population, working for long hours regardless of age or sex beneath the rain of bombs that fell upon the German cities, and they were determined not to let them down.

There was no communism in the Army now, as there had been in 1918, for our troops had learned to know the Workers' Paradise at first hand. Our soldiers still believed, in the mass, in Adolf Hitler. Somehow or other, they thought, he would once again turn the trick, either with the promised miracle weapons and the new U-boats or in some other way. It was their job to gain him time. Even if they had been disaffected, and a small proportion was disaffected, the grip of the régime on the civilian population and on the Army alike was too tight to make rebellion at all a practical proposition. Furthermore, the 'Unconditional Surrender' slogan seemed, to the mass of the Army, to leave no course open save a fight to the bitter end. The Army was well officered, and the troops



trusted their commanders. In fact before the beginning of the Ardennes offensive, morale was as high as could be expected and this compensated to a certain extent for our comparative weakness in man-power and weapons.

But the commanders at least knew that this was the last chance. Should the offensive fail, we realized what the consequences would be. And so it turned out: after our defeat, our forces were henceforth barely adequate for defence, and the fact that we could then go on fighting at all was solely due to the moral strength of the front-line troops.

### *Developments on the Front of Army Group B*

Throughout the last fortnight of November, Model's army group continued to fight a series of violent engagements in the area east of Aachen, between Würselen and Stolberg. Casualties were heavy on both sides. American armoured forces succeeded in penetrating the West Wall near Wallendorf, and though our troops managed to seal this breach, it had proved that the West Wall as held at present was not, or was no longer, the 'impregnable defensive bulwark' to which our propaganda people constantly referred.

The American intention was plain. They wished to widen their breach in the West Wall with the purpose of capturing the two great dams across the Rivers Roer and Urft. The reason for their desire to capture these dams was that they provided a useful weapon in German hands. Should the Germans open the flood-gates the level of the Roer would rise and overflow its banks. It would then be extremely difficult for the Allies to cross the river, particularly if the Germans held a strong defensive position on the east bank.

This attempt to enlarge the breach in the West Wall was defeated by counter-attack. It was now apparent that the Allies would not succeed quickly in achieving a surprise break-through to the Rhine between Cologne and Düsseldorf. On the other hand—and this was decisive for our forthcoming operation—the Aachen area would remain the enemy's point of main effort: he was prepared here to fight a massive battle of attrition, and we could expect a renewal of the violent attacks of the past few weeks.

The attack came in on November 16th, and in the next few days spread to include the whole Geilenkirchen-Eschweiler-Stolberg sector. On the 22nd of November Eschweiler, which had been



bravely defended by the 12th People's Grenadier Division and the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, was lost. However, the front remained intact; the enemy had not succeeded in breaking through. The enemy was now close to the River Roer and there was every reason to believe that his heavy attacks would be resumed almost at once. When this happened, it was unlikely that the British 21st Army Group in the Nijmegen bend would not take a hand in the battle.

So the principal danger-point had not changed. Indeed, the danger was more acute than ever. The next attack must be the decisive one. However, the enemy too had suffered heavy casualties. This fact was born out by the appearance of one new division after the other behind the enemy's front in the Aachen sector. These divisions were drawn from his central reserve, which of course was weakened in consequence. This could only be advantageous to our forthcoming operation. A secondary advantage which accrued to us was that several divisions, the American 2nd, 4th and 28th Infantry which had been badly mauled in the recent battle, were now transferred to precisely that sector in the Ardennes where we were about to attack. This increased our chances of success, and was interpreted by the Armed Forces Command Staff as evidence supporting its thesis that 'the enemy was for the moment at the end of his strength.'

On the other hand the price which we had had to pay for these favourable developments was considerable. Our casualties had also been heavy, and our forces were very strained. As the enemy continued to attack at various points along the front, and one crisis succeeded another, it became necessary to draw on the reserves intended for our offensive. Nor was it possible to withdraw from the front those other divisions which were earmarked for the attack: they had to remain in action and their strength was being whittled away. This was why the planned rest and training for the majority of the formations which were to take part in the offensive could only be carried out to a limited extent, while in some cases the divisions could not be withdrawn at all and had to go straight over from the defensive to the offensive. All this placed a great strain upon the commanders. The preparation for the offensive took precedence over our natural desire to help the troops engaged in ferocious fighting at the front. And in view of the intensive security measures in force, it was impossible to let the fighting troops know the reason for this apparent neglect.



On December 10th Fifth Panzer Army took over the sector of the front from which our attack was to be launched, and which had previously been Seventh Army's. Seventh Army had carried out the necessary preparations for the assault thoroughly and competently, which contributed greatly to the initial success of the two assault armies.

### *Hitler's Address*

On December 11th and 12th Hitler summoned all the commanding officers who were to take part in the forthcoming operation, down to and including the divisional commanders, to his headquarters which was called the 'Eagle's Nest,' near Ziegenberg in Hesse. Half the generals came on one day, half on the other. I was summoned on the 11th, together with the commanders of my two panzer corps, and we arrived to find Field-Marshal von Rundstedt and Model present as well. SS Colonel-General Sepp Dietrich was also already there.

In addition to the army generals a number of SS generals, commanders of SS panzer divisions, had been summoned. The seating accommodation was inadequate and the SS generals politely left the chairs to their senior army colleagues, while they stood. This created the impression on some of the army generals that an SS officer was posted behind each army officer's chair. This was certainly a misunderstanding.

The assembly presented a striking contrast. On one side of the room were the commanding generals, responsible and experienced soldiers, many of whom had made great names for themselves on past battlefields, experts at their trade, respected by their troops. Facing them was the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, a stooped figure with a pale and puffy face, hunched in his chair, his hands trembling, his left arm subject to a violent twitching which he did his best to conceal, a sick man apparently borne down by his burden of responsibility. His physical condition had deteriorated noticeably since our last meeting in Berlin only nine days before. When he walked he dragged one leg behind him.

At his side was Jodl, an old man now, overworked and overtired. His expression used to be taut and his bearing rigid, but this was no longer so. He was mentally and physically exhausted. Later, in conversation with small groups of the assembled officers, he was as a result both touchy and irritable. Keitel's manner showed that he had not been involved in working out the plans and making



the manifold preparations for the 'decisive attack' to the same extent as Jodl.

When Hitler began his speech, which lasted for about an hour and a half, he talked in a low and hesitant voice. Only gradually did his style become more assured, this partially effacing the initial effect that his appearance had produced, at least for those officers who had not seen him in recent months and did not know him well. Nevertheless the impression remained that it was a sick man to whom we listened, a man whose physique and whose nerves were shattered.

He said nothing which was new to me, for I had heard it all before. This speech by the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces was a disappointment to the majority of the generals present, including myself, for the simple reason that he had nothing whatever to say about the problem which was of primary interest to us all at this stage of our preparations—namely, what steps the Supreme Command was taking to compensate for the inadequacies and shortages which overshadowed the operation even now, a few days only before it was due to begin. Contrary to all my expectations, neither Hitler in his address nor Jodl in his statement which followed made any attempt to dissipate the worries I felt concerning the attack. Hitler himself had once said that the preliminary condition for the launching of a successful operation was the 'setting up of fresh, completely battleworthy formations for the offensive.' This had been only partly done, despite all the efforts on the part of the Commander-in-Chief West to increase our strength. Though Rundstedt had been to a certain extent successful in these attempts, he had not succeeded in creating a striking force of the calibre and size desired for our point of main effort. On the other hand I was well aware, as a result of the Berlin conference of December 2nd and of two visits which Speer, the Minister of Munitions, had paid me at my headquarters, that the assault armies had received all the support, both in quality and quantity, of supplies and of weapons, which in the present circumstances and within the time limits imposed could be produced from within beleaguered Germany.

During this conference of December 11th I could not help feeling that, despite all the urgent representations of the senior commanders, Hitler and his personal staff cherished a very high picture indeed of our general combat strength. Whether or not it was too high, I could not at the time say, since I neither knew nor could



know the politico-military situation as a whole, while my knowledge of the enemy's strength was also by no means complete.

Once again we felt the lack of an adviser, representing all three armed services, with sufficient authority to present the armed forces' point of view to Hitler.

The only positive contribution to the forthcoming operation which I took away from the conference was Hitler's own appreciation of the enemy. From his point of view—and he alone had access to all the intelligence sources—the prospects for a successful operation looked favourable. Hitler engraved the decisive importance of the forthcoming attack upon the hearts of the assembled officers. His fundamental thesis was that every formation should continue to advance, regardless of what might be happening on its flanks, and should push forward with all possible speed.

Then we returned to our troops. They and we went into action in a mood of complete determination, ready to fight to the best of our ability and, if need be, to die.

### *Summary of Operations*

The Battle of the Ardennes falls into several distinct phases. In order better to understand its development, it is as well to list these phases before going into details of the various engagements.

*Phase 1.* The initial assault, which is surprisingly successful. The extent of the territorial advance, particularly on the right wing, is not, however, as great as was expected.

*Phase 2.* On the third or fourth day of the operation the intervention of the Allied reserves becomes perceptible, particularly against the southern flank of our attacking force. This causes us anxiety.

*Phase 3.* On the 20th significant deterioration of the situation along Seventh Army's southern flank. This marks the beginning of the turning-point in the course of the operation.

Nevertheless on Fifth Panzer Army's central sector the advance continues until the 24th, a weak vanguard being at one time only some three miles east of Dinant. The centre of gravity of the operation shifts in consequence to Fifth Panzer Army's sector.

The offensive in the Monschau-Malmédy sector is a failure and the attacking forces are split. Allied counter-pressure from the north-west now becomes discernible.

Throughout these three phases the enemy has continued to hold



the road-junction at Bastogne. Owing to the absence of German reserves, and the lack of clear direction, troops have to be taken from the attacking force to encircle Bastogne. This considerably weakens the strength of the thrust towards the Meuse.

*Phase 4.* On the 24th and 25th of December the rôles are reversed, the attacker becomes the attacked. The German forces go over to the defensive.

Hitler forbids the launching of the attack on Maastricht-Heerlen by the XIIth SS Panzer Corps of Fifteenth Army, intended to relieve the enemy's pressure on the front farther south. Indeed, on Hitler's orders, the mobile forces available in the XIIth SS Panzer Corps area are switched southwards and committed in the Ardennes battle, where the first signs of an encirclement movement by the enemy are becoming apparent.

The battle for Bastogne necessitates the transfer thither of forces drawn from the Sixth SS Panzer Army.

*Phase 5.* During the next few days enemy pressure steadily increases. Two points of main enemy effort become apparent, one from the north-west against the northern flank, the other from the south-west against the southern flank. In the course of heavy fighting, with ever-growing intervention on the part of the Allied air forces, the enemy forces drive in the flanks of our attacking armies.

*Phase 6.* The situation becomes critical. From the German point of view the Battle of the Ardennes has now become a defensive battle. Casualties both in men and equipment are heavy. The supply system is defective, fuel for the vehicles in particular being completely unobtainable owing to the enemy's total air supremacy.

Early in January Bastogne is relieved. The battle has now lost its point. Field-Marshal von Rundstedt proposes a rapid withdrawal of the front to the line from which the attack was originally launched. Hitler, however, orders a slow fighting withdrawal.

*Phase 7.* Our flanks are being steadily driven inwards. The danger of encirclement becomes menacing.

On January 13th, 1945, the great Russian offensive begins and the Supreme Command is compelled to transfer troops from the Western Front to the Eastern. This includes troops engaged in the Ardennes battle. The whole of the Sixth SS Panzer Army is withdrawn for operations in the East.

*Phase 8.* By January 25th, in order to cover the departure of Sixth SS Panzer Army, the whole front has been withdrawn to a



shorter line in advance of the line held before the beginning of the operation.

At this point the enemy begins to advance directly towards the two dams—a clear indication that his major attack across the Roer will soon be launched. Simultaneously the British army group is preparing to begin its major offensive in the Lower Rhine bend area.

The defensive power of the German forces in the West has been decisively impaired and the last strategic possibility of holding the decisive Rhine front has vanished.

In the pages that follow I depict in general outline the course of events on the front of Fifth Panzer Army. I have adopted this method because the centre of gravity of the operation was in fact with this army from the first day of the Ardennes Battle, and its engagements decisively affected the operation as a whole.

### *The Cutting-off of the Schnee-Eifel and the Battle of St. Vith*

The night of December 15–16th, 1944, was dark and frosty. The enemy's artillery activity was much the same as on previous evenings and nights. The enemy's infantry was quiet. Therefore we could assume that our approach march and assembly had passed unobserved.

Detailed preparations and ruthless tactics in the assault produced the results for which we had hoped. The infantry assaulted in small bodies and in most places succeeded in penetrating the enemy's front. Many strong-points on the Eifel front were by-passed. By noon we could regard our first assault here as successfully completed. The infantry, however, had needed the closest support not only of their own heavy weapons but also of our few available assault-guns, since they had had a difficult time in penetrating the obstacles in front of the West Wall despite all our most careful preparations.

The central sector of the Schnee-Eifel was ignored, according to plan. The enemy was to be manœuvred out of his positions here, as was accomplished in due course.

The left wing of the LXVIth Army Corps was noticeably slower in its advance into the Eifel. This endangered our plan for rapidly sealing off the Schnee-Eifel. This, however, was the essential preliminary to the next stage of our advance, which was to be through



Schönberg to St. Vith. St. Vith, the centre of a considerable road-network, was as important a point on this sector as was Bastogne on the army's left flank.

The events of the day in the area of the army's right-hand corps were disappointing. The corps failed to keep up with the time schedule which I had laid down for its advance. I hoped that time thus lost could be made up by a continuation of the attack after dark. I therefore spent the night of December 16th-17th with the staff of the 18th People's Grenadier Division which held the key to the operations on this part of the front. Thanks to the energy of the divisional commander, this division succeeded in capturing Schönberg on the morning of the 17th. This success seemed to show that the corps could now make up for time lost: the events of the day, however, did not realize this hope. Despite an excellent performance on the part of the troops and the officers of all ranks, the infantry corps with the forces at its disposal was incapable of carrying out the attack with the necessary violence and within the time limit that would ensure co-operation with the army's two panzer corps. Nor could it quickly capture the vital road junction of St. Vith, which was a pivot in the enemy's defensive position, and which it was essential that we seize for the sake of the operations by the left wing of Sixth SS Panzer Army. The enemy forces threatened with encirclement in the Schnee-Eifel attacked westwards, straight across the line of advance of the corps' left-hand battle group. This held the corps up and it failed to capture St. Vith on the 17th.

The right-hand division of the corps, which had hitherto been most successful, was now also in difficulties, though not through any fault of its own. On its right the left wing of 6th SS Panzer Army had made only limited progress and the enemy was therefore able to fire into the open right flank of the division.

This delay in the sector of the LXVIth Army Corps and the failure of its right-hand neighbour to keep up was repeated in the rest of Sixth SS Panzer Army's sector, farther to the north. There could be no question of the SS Panzer Army letting loose its mobile formations on the first day of the battle. The right wing of this army was quickly held up by the intervention of the Ninth United States Army, immediately to its north, and did not even succeed in capturing Monschau. Nor did this SS Army have any successes to show on its central sector, and between Monschau and a point south of Malmédy it seized very little ground. This meant



that the SS Panzer Army did not control sufficient roads in its own country for the planned advance of that army to the Meuse; the result, which soon became apparent, was that Sixth SS Panzer Army would have to share the roads in Fifth Panzer Army's sector. This meant that our roads would be choked with troops and vehicles and further delay would result.

Five divisions of the Sixth SS Panzer Army were soon pinned down in heavy, fluctuating fighting in the Elsenborn-Krinkelt area. The army's leading armoured formation, the 1st SS Panzer Division, pushed forward into the area west and south-west of Malmédy where it was soon in danger of being cut off. This advance by the 1st SS Panzer Division made no difference to the operations along the rest of Sixth SS Panzer Army's front.

Nor did the parachute operation, known as *Hohes Venn* and ordered by Hitler, have any effect on the general course of our offensive. When planning the attack Hitler had decided, in my opinion quite correctly, against the use of parachute troops: he did not believe that the Luftwaffe was capable of carrying out a drop with any adequate prospects of success. Furthermore, since the launching of the attack was to be dependent on bad weather, this alone made it wellnigh impossible to employ parachutists. However, on the express wish of Field-Marshal Model it was decided to use them, though not where he wished. Army Group B had wanted them dropped in the Krinkelt area, to help smash the enemy's defensive positions which were believed to be very strong there. Instead, they were dropped to the north of Malmédy, with the task of creating a front facing north.

Operation *Greif*, which had been directly ordered by the Supreme Command and which involved the employment of special troops disguised in American uniforms, was equally unsuccessful. The purpose of *Greif* was to facilitate the break-through of the enemy front, the advance to the Meuse and the capture of its bridges before the enemy could blow them. If possible the troops of Operation *Greif* were to capture these bridges single-handed. The failure of the plan was inevitable, since it proved impossible to arrange careful and timely co-ordination with the conventional units of the army. We could not make the necessary preparations since even the army commanders were only partially informed concerning the scope of, and plans for, Operation *Greif*. To judge by the way it was handled, it seems likely that *Greif* was Hitler's own brain-child, of which he was inordinately proud.



The commander assigned to *Greif* was the SS leader, Skorzeny, who had participated in the celebrated operation which had led to the freeing of Mussolini from his incarceration on the Gran Sasso, a bold and successful *coup de main*. He was now given the job of creating and commanding Panzer Brigade 150, and received his orders and instructions directly from Hitler. The Army was ordered to send captured weapons and vehicles to the Brigade, which was being set up in Germany, though the commanding generals were not informed what the Brigade's tactical organization was to be. When a demand reached the Commander-in-Chief West for captured enemy uniforms, he refused to comply with it. Indeed he insisted that the Supreme Command guarantee that the scope of the proposed operations by Panzer Brigade 150 should not exceed the normal and permissible nature of a *ruse de guerre*. This was explicitly promised by the Supreme Command.

*Greif* had no effect on the operations of the army, owing to the fact that the enemy learned about it prematurely and the whole thing therefore broke down at once. An officer of the LXVIth Army Corps was taken prisoner on December 16th while driving from headquarters to the front. In his possession were several copies of the operational orders for *Greif*, which he was unable to destroy before they fell into enemy hands. The Americans were thus enabled to give their troops full and detailed warnings, as we learned from our signals intercept service. The importance of Operation *Greif* has been grossly exaggerated since the war.

Let us return to the battle, as it now went. The situation might be summed up as follows. Sixth SS Panzer Army on the right had been assigned the decisive role by Hitler, but it proved incapable of a quick advance to the Meuse. The unhappiness of its commander was revealed by the fact that he kept silent for days on end. Sixth Panzer Army's staff clearly lacked the ability needed for coping with the situation. The Supreme Command's folly in creating the Sixth SS Panzer Army and in assigning it its present rôle, had now to be paid for in every way. Its roads became blocked, nor was its staff competent to sort out the tangle. The junior commanders did not possess the tactical experience needed to ensure that the momentum of the attack was maintained, and fatal delays ensued. Furthermore, the enemy put up a particularly tough and determined resistance in the Elsenborn-Krinkelt area. Sixth SS Panzer Army, completely forgetting its primary mission, committed strong forces against the Americans there. Violent fighting, entailing heavy casu-



alties, developed. Sixth SS Panzer Army had to reinforce the troops engaged, and all for no purpose. The proper course to have followed, once the toughness of the enemy's resistance had been recognized, would have been to throw a defensive ring around the enemy's positions sufficiently strong to cover the drive westwards which should have been continued with the maximum forces available.

I once again spent the night of December 17th–18th with my right-hand infantry corps (during the day I had been at Dasburg in close touch with the commanders of my two panzer corps), for at that time the centre of gravity of the whole operation lay in the neighbourhood of the boundary between my Fifth Panzer Army and Sixth SS Panzer Army to our right. I hoped that from the headquarters of the 18th People's Grenadier Division I might personally influence the attack on St. Vith. While going to that headquarters on the evening of the 17th I met Field-Marshal Model. Like myself, he was on foot, for as a result of the utter chaos on the roads east of Schönberg it was quicker to walk than to drive. Model said that he would temporarily release the Führer Escort Brigade from Army Group reserve to participate in the attack on St. Vith next day, which would be the 18th. Both he and I were reluctant to commit this armoured brigade with LXVI Corps, since it meant that the brigade would, for the time being, be unavailable for any other operations; and it might well be that its presence elsewhere on the front would be vital to the success of the whole offensive. On the other hand the capture of St. Vith was very important not only for my army but even more so for Sixth SS Panzer Army.

I agreed to commit this brigade against St. Vith because I hoped that so high-class and well-equipped a unit, provided it could bring all its forces quickly to bear, would rapidly decide the issue in this sector of the front. However, road movement was so difficult that the brigade did not manage to reach the front at all on the 18th. It was not until the 19th that I was able to send it into action. Its intervention was decisive on the 20th and during the night of the 21st–22nd the enemy forces, which had fought most bravely, evacuated the town, under pressure from the LXVIth Corps.

The Americans had fully exploited their defensive success in and about St. Vith, and had known how to swing the battle in their favour in this area. Many more of our troops had been tied down



than we had anticipated. The Germans had been compelled to commit an armoured unit here, intended for operations elsewhere. But, more important, the delaying action of St. Vith had given the enemy time to reinforce his defensive positions in the Salm sector and to seal the northern flank of our break-through. The Germans never succeeded in breaking the American line thus established, despite repeated attempts to do so.

### *The Drive for the Meuse and the First Phase of the Siege of Bastogne*

The two panzer corps of Fifth Panzer Army, the LVIIIth on the right and the XLVIIth on the left, had both broken through the enemy front and thus created the conditions for a westward advance. After initial successes it is true that the right wing of the LVIIIth Panzer Corps had been thrown back onto the eastern bank of the Our by a rapidly mounted enemy counter-attack, but this had been made up for by an unexpected success on the part of the corps' left wing. This battle group had not only forced a crossing of the Our but had exploited its surprising success by forming a bridgehead on December 16th which was to be of great importance in subsequent operations. The offensive performance of the 560th People's Grenadier Division, a unit consisting of very young soldiers whose first battle this was, proved to be outstanding despite the bad weather and road conditions. But the 116th Panzer Division, coming up behind the 560th, was not able to cross the river during the night of the 16th-17th. Attempts were therefore made to move it over a bridge which had been captured by a neighbouring unit, farther south. This was done, though at the cost of creating a bad bottle-neck at this crossing-place.

The left wing of my army, the XLVIIth Panzer Corps, had little difficulty in forcing the Our and overrunning the forward American positions. On the morning of the first day the building of a bridge could be started near Dasburg. At 16.00 hours the leading tanks rolled across this emergency bridge, but their further advance was slow. The road from Dasburg to Clerf was blocked for miles by tree-trunks, felled by the Germans to cover their retreat during the autumn of 1944. A traffic jam was the result, reaching back to the bridge and to the approaches on the east bank: this slowed down the momentum of the attack everywhere, despite the plainly apparent desire of all units to push on. The enormous traffic block



affected the Panzer Demonstration Division too. Only weak elements of its reconnaissance battalion could be moved across the Our, while the bulk of the division was unable even to reach the river. I regarded the hold-up of this division as a very grave disappointment at the time, for I expected great results from its commitment. My fears were to be fully justified in the days to come.

On the 17th the 2nd Panzer Division of this left-hand corps managed to push westwards along the northern bank of the Clerf and then, turning south, secure a crossing of the river in the neighbourhood of Clerf railway station. All enemy opposition soon ceased here. Indeed the American plan of operations at this stage apparently involved a deliberate withdrawal behind the Clerf, for at approximately the same time enemy resistance ceased in the sector of the 26th People's Grenadier Division. A battalion of this division fought its way into the village of Clerf during the course of the day and at 17.00 hours succeeded in capturing the undamaged southern bridge. Although the mass of the division did not manage to reach the Clerf before nightfall, it crossed the river after dark without meeting any opposition. It was in close touch with its left-hand neighbour, the 5th Parachute Division of the Seventh Army.

Thus both panzer corps were well on their way to establishing a break-through. The next stage would be to keep closely on the enemy's heels and prevent him from establishing a new defensive line. It was therefore of decisive importance that the panzer divisions, and particularly the Panzer Demonstration Division on which so much depended, be sent forward with all speed.

On our immediate left the 5th Parachute Division had won a crossing over the River Clerf and thus opened the road for a further thrust westwards, through Wiltz. Here, near the junction of Fifth Panzer and Seventh Armies, we seemed to have discovered a particularly weak spot in the enemy's defences, which was all the more useful in that the southern wing of Fifth Panzer Army was also making relatively good progress. But Seventh Army, owing to a shortage of engineer units, was unable immediately to exploit this advantage. It was not until the 18th or even the 19th of December that the three to five emergency bridges could be completed. Seventh Army rightly believed that this delay, at the decisive moment of surprise, had lost the Army its best chance of breaking through. It was now doubtful whether Seventh Army would be able to carry out its mission, which was to cover the lengthening left flank of Fifth Panzer Army's westward advance.



At Fifth Panzer Army, despite our successes on the 17th of December, it began to be problematical whether we could succeed in reaching our objectives within the time-limit set us. Any hope of doing so must depend on favourable circumstances: in particular American opposition west of the Clerf must be so weak that our leading troops would have no difficulty in brushing it aside. But this was hardly to be expected. The enemy's forces, though weak, were putting up a considerable—in some cases a most stubborn—resistance.

During the course of the 18th the chaotic condition of the roads, to which reference has already been made, began seriously to affect our operations. At 09.00 hours the Panzer Demonstration Division crossed the Clerf, but it was evening before it reached Nider-Wampach. During the following night it advanced on Mageret, which was cleared of the enemy by first light, and only on the morning of the 19th did it reach Bastogne. This division had had a hard time. It had once again been held up on the overcrowded roads, and the difficulties enumerated in the division's reports were all undoubtedly exact. Nevertheless it remains open to question whether it would not have been wiser to switch part of the division's strength southwards: this might well have led to a considerable success in this area.

On the 19th the momentum of XLVIIth Panzer Corps' attack slowed down once again. Towards noon heavy fighting developed with a Combat Command of the 10th United States Armoured Division. This Combat Command had been identified moving westwards on the previous evening, and had been located by our reconnaissance early on the 19th in the Longvilly area. In the course of the morning the Combat Command attacked the southern flank of the 2nd Panzer Division. Its task was evidently to enable the Americans to complete the defensive front that they were building east of Bastogne, by carrying out mobile harassing operations against our advancing troops. The outcome of the engagement was the complete destruction of the Combat Command. From the enemy's point of view, however, this expensive operation was not pure loss: the main attack by the 26th People's Grenadier Division and by the Panzer Demonstration Division of the XLVIIth Panzer Corps was delayed thereby until midday. The enemy had gained several valuable hours in which to prepare defensive positions east and south-east of Bastogne. Our reconnaissance revealed that this was not a case of weak forces being hastily sent forward to form



a thin defensive shield: on the contrary, it was a carefully organized defence by a single, powerful unit with artillery support.

The advance of the 26th People's Grenadier Division was halted in front of Bixory, which was strongly held. The Panzer Demonstration Division captured Neffe and in the evening succeeded in fighting its way into Wardin. Reconnaissance troops reported that more powerful enemy forces were in and about Marvie.

The problem which faced XLVIIth Panzer Corps on the evening of the 19th was whether to commit all its forces with the purpose of seizing Bastogne at once, or whether, in accordance with the original plan, to entrust the 26th People's Grenadier Division with the eventual capture of the place while the two panzer divisions by-passed Bastogne and pushed on westwards. Fifth Panzer Army decided that the Panzer Demonstration Division should also be sent in against Bastogne at once, but that part of that division should be held ready to resume the westward advance through Sibret. The importance of Bastogne was considerable. In enemy hands it must influence all our movements to the west, damage our supply system and tie up considerable German forces. It was therefore essential that we capture it at once.

Even before the battle had begun, it had seemed doubtful whether we had enough troops to carry out our two tasks—the advance and the covering of our southern flank—simultaneously. To invest Bastogne would mean a further draught on our already inadequate resources. Bastogne in American hands would remain a magnet for the enemy's forces, and thus a permanent danger for us, since were they to relieve the beleaguered town it would provide them with an excellent jumping-off point from which to imperil our entire offensive operation. On the other hand were we now to commit the whole of the XLVIIth Panzer Corps to the capture of Bastogne, it would mean that we had, at best temporarily, abandoned our offensive plans, since this would put a stop to any further advance westwards. The Fifth Panzer Army therefore decided that the 2nd Panzer Division should take Noville and then without hesitation drive on west. Meanwhile XLVIIth Panzer Corps was ordered to send the Panzer Demonstration Division in to attack Bastogne again from the east on the 20th. The task of the 26th People's Grenadier Division was to continue the attack towards Bastogne from the positions it had now reached: after crossing the Noville-Bastogne road, it was to assault Bastogne from the north. The Commander-in-Chief West now proposed that the forces



originally envisaged as forming the right pincer of the 'Small Solution' be sent in from the Geilenkirchen sector to attack southwards towards Maastricht and the area to the east of that town. This proposal was turned down by Hitler. Nor was that all. He ordered that the two Panzer divisions of the corps in question be moved from the Geilenkirchen area to the Ardennes. This now took place. When the commander of the 9th Panzer Division reported to me, his division, which was to join the XLVIIth Panzer Corps, was straggled along sixty miles of road, nor did he know when or where he was supposed to collect the fuel which would enable him to complete his approach march.

On the 20th the 2nd Panzer Division succeeded in capturing Noville and Foy. At midnight the division reached Orthenville where it seized a bridge across the Ourthe intact. Leaving security forces behind, it drove on westwards. Meanwhile the Panzer Demonstration Division had taken Bixory, but the 26th People's Grenadier Division had been unable to continue its advance in the face of heavy enemy opposition. The attack from Neffe towards Mont had failed to make any progress. Wardin had been captured but the enemy continued to put up a tough and brave defence of Marvie. Enemy resistance south of Bastogne was apparently not as strong as it was to the east of the town.

On December 21st the weather improved and for the first time enemy fighter-bombers appeared over both the panzer corps, though so far only in limited numbers. 2nd Panzer Division was now short of fuel and could therefore only make limited advances; it enlarged its bridgehead over the Ourthe to Tenneville. After hard fighting the 26th People's Grenadier Division succeeded in taking Sibret. The main attack on Bastogne from the north and east did not progress, however. The encirclement of Bastogne was now complete, save for a gap between Champs and Senonchamps. In the course of this day an officer of the Panzer Demonstration Division was sent into Bastogne under a flag of truce to demand the surrender of the town. This was done without my approval. I regarded it as a pointless action, since in the event of the enemy's refusal to surrender, there was nothing we could do to enforce our wishes. Our artillery did not even have sufficient ammunition for a heavy bombardment of the town. When I met the corps commander and he told me of the despatch of the flag of truce, it was too late for me to countermand the order, since the officer had already left. Our demand for surrender was refused. On the evening



of the 21st reports from our reconnaissance did not as yet indicate that fresh enemy forces from the West were moving against the front of our two leading panzer divisions.

On the 22nd the activity of the United States Air Force began to increase. The Panzer Demonstration Division, advancing on Rochefort, reached St. Hubert, which was captured during the course of the next night. In the course of the afternoon individual vehicles moving along the Rémichampagne–Morhet road were shot at and set on fire by tank and anti-tank guns firing from the south near the point where that road crosses the Bastogne–Vaux les Rosières road. It transpired that a small enemy force had broken through from the south and was firing on the crossroads from a position a few hundred yards north of Petite Rosière. Tanks of the Panzer Demonstration Division forced the enemy group to retreat. I myself witnessed this engagement, for I was with the leading troops of the Panzer Demonstration Division.

Seventh Army now reported that during the course of the day the 5th Parachute Division had been repeatedly attacked by American reconnaissance forces coming up from the south. The division, however, said that there was no cause for anxiety. Its covering line was pushed forwards, south of the Chaumont–Remoiville road. Its advanced troops were located in and about Libramont.

The attack by the 26th People's Grenadier Division made slow progress towards Bastogne. During the course of the day heavy fighting took place and elements of the division were for a time in a critical situation. Both on the 21st and again on the 22nd the American Air Force dropped supplies to the Bastogne garrison, an operation we could easily watch since the skies were clearing. On the evening of the 22nd the American forces in Bastogne launched a series of counter-attacks: by scraping together all our available reserves, we just managed to defeat these attacks. The brave 26th People's Grenadier Division had suffered heavy casualties during these last few days and its fighting strength had decreased greatly. It was not clear whether the purpose of these enemy attacks was to break out of our encirclement. It was possible that the Bastogne garrison was attempting to join hands with the enemy forces advancing from the south whose pressure was now unmistakable. The next stage after the breaking of the Bastogne encirclement would presumably be an attack against the deep flank of the panzer divisions of Fifth Panzer Army which were still moving



westwards. This, at least, was the firm impression I gained as I drove back through lively enemy fire which was being put down south-west of Bastogne. From the evening of December 22nd the situation at Bastogne was reversed: henceforth the investing forces were to be on the defensive.

### *The Highpoint of our Offensive*

When, on December 22nd, the 2nd Panzer Division had broken the enemy blocking line between Marche and Rochefort in the Hargimont area and had, on the evening of this day, captured Hassonville and Jamodenne, it seemed that the conditions existed for a successful advance by this division to the Meuse crossings in and about Dinant. It is clear that such an advance was dangerous in view of the general situation. The 2nd and 116th Panzer Divisions, which would form the striking force, would be far in advance of the rest of the front. Sixth SS Panzer Army was still stuck fast. Pressure against the Seventh Army, which had been given the task of covering our southern flank, was increasing. It was already under attack by the Third United States Army, and had had to surrender ground both in the centre and on the left of its front. A wide gap existed between the right of Fifth Panzer Army and the Sixth SS Panzer Army, and our right wing had had to be withdrawn in consequence. We could no longer reckon on deriving any protection from offensive operations carried out southwards or westwards by our Seventh Army. Further divisions of the Third United States Army were reported moving up from the south. At this moment Model, probably remembering the so-called 'Small Solution' which he had always favoured, regarded the capture of Bastogne as so important that he was insisting that Fifth Panzer Army must in all circumstances take the town; this was a task which my army simply could not perform without abandoning its main objective. There could be no doubt that by now the initiative, and hence control of the future course of operations, had passed to the enemy. Incidentally the Allies made little attempt to conceal the fact that they were withdrawing forces from other sectors of the Western Front. Our wireless intercept services were able to watch the progress of these withdrawals in exact detail.

During the night of December 22nd-23rd the reconnaissance battalion of the 2nd Panzer Division continued to advance. By the next afternoon it, together with other units of the division,



had reached Conneux. During the course of this advance it had repeatedly brushed against new enemy formations coming down from the north, so that elements of the division had constantly to be detached in order to provide flank protection. With this end in view bodies of troops were left behind at Hogue, Sinsin, Pessoux and Haversin.

On December 23rd the situation became more acute when the enemy began to mount stronger counter-attacks, with armoured support, from the Marche area. The enemy gained temporary control of the Bande-Hargimont road. During the course of this day a battalion was sent forward to support the 2nd Panzer Division, but it was not strong enough to restore the situation by attacking the enemy. It had to be sent in to reinforce the flank cover. This improved the state of affairs there and further enemy attacks from the south and south-east could be beaten off. In the course of the morning the reconnaissance battalion had already reached Foy-Notre-Dame and broken the enemy's defensive line in a surprise attack. We captured large stocks of vehicles and other equipment. The other elements of the division made good progress too, but soon became aware of mounting enemy pressure from the north and north-east. This brought the advance to a halt. The division had to be split up into two groups, fighting back to back, the one to the west of Conneux, the other in the neighbourhood and south of that locality. Covering forces and the divisional supply train were compelled to organize all-round defensive positions in the various villages where they fought a series of violent engagements against superior enemy forces. These small detachments were the first to be eliminated. The two battle groups fighting in the Conneux area were able to establish contact and, later, join up together. But the shortage of fuel and munitions soon decreased their combat efficiency.

If the advance of the panzer army were to continue it was essential that the Panzer Demonstration Division should succeed in moving towards the Meuse on the following day, the 24th, and thus relieve the 2nd Panzer Division. A concerted effort by all available forces of Fifth Panzer Army and Army Group B might even at this late hour help to make our offensive a success.

To return now to LVIIIth Panzer Corps, the central corps of Fifth Panzer Army; its operations had been envisaged as follows. The 116th Panzer Division was to be committed south of the Ourthe, the 560th People's Grenadier north of that river, since its



right hand neighbour was still fighting on the Our. The 116th Panzer Division was to advance from Houffalize to Laroche and thence as far west as it could go. But during the night of December 20th a report was received that the Ourthe bridge three miles north of Bertogne had been blown. If the division were to repair it with the resources at its disposal, the bridge would not be fit to carry traffic before the evening of the 21st at the earliest. Therefore Fifth Panzer Army ordered that the 116th Panzer Division be halted, turned about and moved during the course of the next night through Houffalize to Samrée, which had been captured early on the morning of the 20th. The Division reached Dochamps on the same evening. It now appeared that the enemy had been overrun in the sector of LVIIIth Panzer Corps and was beating a hasty retreat. It was therefore imperative that the Ourthe be crossed without delay and territory seized on the north bank before the enemy succeeded in establishing a new defensive line along the river.

Nevertheless on December 21st enemy resistance to the advance of the 116th Panzer Division stiffened, and the division's attacks on Hotton were repulsed. The attacking units of the division soon found themselves under heavy artillery fire, coming in particular from the dominating high ground north of Soy. It became increasingly unlikely that the 116th Panzer Division would manage to throw back the enemy on its front and gain more ground to the north-west. I assumed that fresh enemy forces were in action here. There was no possibility of confirming this by the identification of prisoners.

However, our orders were to continue the advance westwards, regardless of circumstances. This applied to the LVIIIth Panzer Corps as well. Furthermore, by exploiting 2nd Panzer Division's advance farther to the south, it did still seem possible to co-ordinate an advance by the LVIIIth Panzer Corps along the south bank of the Ourthe. Therefore the 116th Panzer Division was ordered to disengage on the 22nd and to advance along the southern bank in a north-westerly direction by way of Laroche. It was hoped that on the following day the 116th Panzer Division would succeed in advancing through Laroche, passing by Marche and winning ground towards Baillonville. On the success or failure of this attack—or so I thought at the time—must depend the decision: if the Meuse could be reached, then the two panzer corps might yet turn north along its eastern bank in accordance with the old plan for the 'Small Solution,' thus relieving the LXVIth Army Corps on



the right wing of Fifth Panzer Army and enabling the Sixth SS Panzer Army to achieve some success after all.

On the 23rd the bridge of Laroche, which had been slightly damaged, was repaired by the engineers of the 116th Panzer Division. Almost at the same time the division reported contact with a newly arrived American division, the 84th Infantry. The attack ordered for the 24th in the Vardenne area was repulsed, as were the attacks by the other two right-hand divisions of this corps in the neighbourhood of Lamorménil. The enemy had succeeded in blocking the whole front of the LVIIIth Panzer Corps. Nor was he content with this defensive victory, but immediately began to assume the offensive. Nevertheless the 116th Panzer Division had to continue its attacks, because it was necessary to bring some relief to the 2nd Panzer Division which was far ahead in the west. The Führer Escort Brigade, which had been placed under command of this corps, was brought forward. It was to help the 116th Panzer Division, now engaged in bitter fighting about Vardenne, by capturing the high ground near Hotton. However, while actually going into the attack, the brigade was halted, turned about and ordered to proceed with all speed to Bastogne.

### *On the Defensive: the Second Phase at Bastogne*

By December 24th one panzer division had succeeded in advancing to a point only three miles east of Dinant. However, on the evening of that day it was clear that the high-water mark of our operation had been reached. We now knew that we would never reach our objective, principally because of the situation on the flanks: not only had the advance come to a halt on either wing, the troops there were subject to growing pressure coming from the north-west and also from the south and south-west. But perhaps the most decisive factor of all was the change in the weather. From the 23rd and 24th of December on the Allied Air Forces were able to operate freely: they found worthwhile targets throughout the whole area of our offensive. Bomb carpets were laid down on the roads and railways behind the front, and our already inadequate supply system was throttled. The mobility of our forces decreased steadily and rapidly. Snow fell, the temperature dropped, the scanty mountain roads were sheets of ice and movement by daylight became for all intents and purposes impossible behind our front.



This marked the end of our attempt to reach the Meuse. Now, so far as Fifth Panzer Army was concerned, the main operation was to be the Battle of Bastogne. This was to be the epilogue to our unsuccessful Ardennes offensive and became the focus of bitter and protracted fighting. Division after division was drawn into the battle; as each arrived in the Bastogne area it was committed at once. The scope of this chapter is too limited to permit description of the Bastogne engagements in any sort of detail. It must, however, be stated that while elements of the Fifth Panzer Army were still attempting to advance, Bastogne became a maelstrom into which the German forces, including the attacking forces intended for the Meuse, were sucked. Bastogne had at one time drawn nine German divisions, with two corps commands, into the battle. It necessitated the transfer of units from the Sixth SS Panzer Army to the Fifth Panzer Army, and thereby nullified all the offensive intentions of the Supreme Command. The defence of Bastogne, undertaken in apparently hopeless circumstances, was thus decisive in foiling our offensive plans.

It is of interest to compare the massing of German strength which now took place about Bastogne with the forces previously allotted to Fifth Panzer Army for its thrust to the Meuse. The tremendous effort now devoted to Bastogne—for an operation which in fact could not influence the larger picture—far surpassed the effort which Fifth Panzer Army had been able to make in its westward drive.

A unified attack on Bastogne might have had a chance of succeeding even now, provided that it had been possible to collect all the reinforcements within a few days and send them in to the assault together. This was not the case. Units were delayed on the roads and arrived only piecemeal and below strength. The Supreme Command, however, insisted on rigid adherence to its plans: despite the changed situation, it ordered one uncoordinated attack after the other, none of which was successful. Only when the attack on Luttrebois by the 1st SS Panzer Division, with the objective of blocking the road from the south to Bastogne, had failed, did the Supreme Command finally accept the judgment of Army Group B and of Fifth Panzer Army, namely, that there was no longer anything to be gained by attacks in this sector, since the troops, though their valour was beyond praise, were too weak in man-power, weapons and munitions to deal with the enemy forces now opposing them. The cold and the biting wind were also causing our men



great hardships, to which must be added the difficulties experienced in keeping them supplied.

It was now the urgent wish of the senior commanders that all our attacks be discontinued at once and the troops withdrawn from the deep salient which we had created. This desire was based on our appreciation of the situation as it existed on December 29th. There were now such large enemy forces assembled both north and south of the salient that we could not hope, with the men and material at our disposal, to prevent the break-through of our flanks towards Houffalize which threatened from right and left alike. Furthermore, the enemy's undisputed supremacy in the air meant that our forces could only operate in the hours of twilight, while marching, digging, the movement of supplies and so on were only possible in total darkness. But despite further serious deterioration of the situation on both sides of the Ourthe and on the right wing on Seventh Army in the Wiltz area, it was not until the enemy attack had been launched that the Supreme Command, on January 3rd, 1945, at last and reluctantly agreed to a withdrawal.

On January 12th-13th the Russians opened their great offensive from the Baronov bridgehead. Its effects were felt on the Western Front at once. The transfer of forces eastwards, which had long been hanging over our heads, now took place with all speed. The Sixth SS Panzer Army departed, with its army troops, two corps commands and four SS panzer divisions, both the Führer Escort and Grenadier Brigades, and above all its artillery and bridging columns. The effect that this massive withdrawal of troops and equipment had upon our chronic and critical fuel shortage can well be imagined. We now had to pay for our tardiness in retiring from the great salient which in any case was bound to be lost in the end. The exhausted condition of our troops had been underestimated at Supreme Headquarters. They were more tired even than we had expected, and were no longer capable, either physically or mentally, of coping with a tough, well-equipped and well-fed enemy. Replacements received in January were inadequate both in quality and quantity, being mostly older men or of a low medical category and ill-trained as well. The armament industry in Germany was crumbling beneath the growing weight of the Allied bombing raids. In mid-January the industrial area of Upper Silesia was lost, and the effect on the supply of weapons, munitions and equipment of all sorts began to be felt. The soldiers on the Western Front lost their faith in ultimate victory, as they watched the steady increase in



enemy power that was massing against them. With their faith they lost too their defensive strength, though they continued to do their duty. This devotion to the very end was perhaps the most outstanding phenomenon of these last few months of the war.

### *Conclusion*

For five weeks the troops had fought, with remarkable courage and tenacity both in the offensive and in defence, without rest and in circumstances of great hardship. They had been inspired to wellnigh superhuman efforts by their belief that their sacrifice would win time for our political leaders to end the war.

Despite all their devotion, the offensive failed. Within a few days of its opening, it seemed likely that it would fail, because of the objectives assigned. The target was too remote and the strength of the attacking force quite disproportionate to this distant aim. Our forces lacked the necessary 'depth' in men and material alike to exploit rapidly and powerfully the break-through, once that had been achieved. At the same time there were not sufficient troops available to secure the flanks of the attacking column without drawing on the forces which were intended to thrust for the Meuse.

Seventh Army was also too weak to carry out its primary tasks, which were not only to cover the southern flank of the two panzer armies but also to send an attacking force into Luxembourg. As a result it could not perform either task satisfactorily. But a successful advance by Seventh Army was essential for the operations on the left wing of Fifth Panzer Army.

The general lack of strength had as result another and greater failure. No definite point of main effort was established. There can be no question that the rigid adherence to the original objective was a mistake, as was the organization and commitment of our forces. The Supreme Command, out of touch with conditions at the front and displaying an increased and misplaced obstinacy in its insistence that its orders be carried out to the letter, no longer displayed the necessary flexibility in adjusting operations to the situation as it developed. The ultimate fault was Hitler's. When it transpired that all the divisions originally envisaged for the 1944 Ardennes offensive would not in fact be available, the plan should have been changed to accord with the rather weaker forces at our disposal. Similarly, once it had become plain that there was no possibility of continuing our offensive, the decision should have been taken in



good time to go over to the defensive and withdraw to the positions which we had previously held.

As I see it, there were three main factors which contributed to our defeat:

1. The enemy reacted more swiftly to the attack launched on December 16th than had been anticipated by our Supreme Command.

2. The enemy's counter-measures were co-ordinated as part of a single plan.

3. When the weather cleared the enemy enjoyed the same unlimited air supremacy that he had had in Normandy.

On the other hand, one can now say that the enemy's counter-attack began too soon. Had he delayed it, he might have succeeded in destroying our entire offensive strength in the Ardennes. That is to say, his actual victory was an 'ordinary' victory, with the defeated German Army withdrawing, despite heavy losses, to the line from which it had first advanced. Meanwhile the Allies had been compelled to cease their attacks along the entire Western Front. They had had to reconquer territory which they had already fought for once before.

Germany was given a breathing-space, and relief was provided for the home front suffering under the rain of Allied bombs. But the cost was so great that the offensive failed in fact to show a profit. The last German reserves had suffered such losses that they were no longer capable of affecting the situation either on the Western or on the Eastern Front.

The rapid advance by the Red Army nullified the possible effects of the Ardennes Offensive. It made a speedy end to the war inevitable. Time gained on the Western Front was thereby rendered illusory.

The failure of the offensive probably affected the morale and therefore the behaviour of soldiers and civilians alike and may thus have contributed to speeding the end of the war.

Nevertheless, and despite the outcome, it cannot be denied that German troops and commanders alike gave their all in this last attempt to influence Germany's destiny. Despite their inferiority in numbers and weapons, the attacking divisions fought magnificently. To deny this is to deny the Americans the true measure of their victory.



# FINALE

BY SIEGFRIED WESTPHAL

WHILE in the Ardennes the exhausted troops of Army Group B were being forced back, under a ceaseless hail of American bombs, to those positions in the West Wall from which their attack had been launched, Hitler, in his advance headquarters near Bad Nauheim called the 'Eagle's Nest,' received news which sent him hurrying back to Berlin. This was the report of the new great Soviet offensive, which began from the bridgehead that they had captured across the Vistula at Baronov. The events of the next three months were to bring the war to an end.

The final outcome was hastened by the previous weakening of the Eastern Front in the interests of the Ardennes Offensive and by the radical decline in the production of munitions. For the German people, many millions of whom—men, women and children alike—were fleeing from the Red Army along the icy roads of Central Europe, the news was now only an unbroken series of disasters: the Russians occupied Silesia, East and West Prussia, Pomerania, and even the Mark Brandenburg, the cradle of the old Hohenzollern empire: the Ruhr was encircled: the British entered Hamburg and Kiel, the Americans Frankfurt on Main, Stuttgart and Munich: Germans in Czechoslovakia were massacred: Saxony and Thuringia were lost and the Russian advance guards met the Americans near Magdeburg on the Elbe: the Red Army captured Berlin, and, finally, the German armed forces surrendered to the victorious enemy commanders. The German people suffered and starved so terribly during these months that when the news came of Hitler's escape from his mortal judges by suicide, it excited no interest and caused scarcely any comment. People were by then so hopelessly apathetic and weary that only one desire still remained—a longing that at last it should all be over and done with. Yet one more trial was to be inflicted on many Germans, and those not the worst of my compatriots. This was the cruel discovery that all the great sacrifices, all the selfless devotion had been in vain, that millions of brave men had willingly risked and lost their lives for a cause which only now was revealed as vile. And this inevitably raised another question. Why did the war end thus? Did we have to lose the war, despite all our great victories of the early days, despite the fact that we had at one time been masters of almost all Europe?



Today Germans of sensible and sober judgment know the answer to these questions. In view of the revulsion and hatred created abroad by Hitler's criminal government, the Germans could not hope indefinitely to defy the world with arms in their hands. The world was simply too big. A German victory against such tremendous odds, alike in man-power, raw materials and industrial capacity, was quite out of the question once the comparatively localized war of 1939-40 had become a world conflict, with the United States of America and Soviet Russia ranged against us. Many German soldiers were well aware of this: many German soldiers had desired war as little as had Germany's civilian population. Many had, indeed, divined what the probable outcome must be, and this did not make it any easier for them to do their duty, yet as soldiers they had no choice *but* to do their duty. After the Casablanca Declaration, in which it was announced that only unconditional surrender on Germany's part would be acceptable to the Allied governments, even those who were fully informed concerning the true situation saw no alternative to fighting on until the bitter end. Only a few men reacted so strongly that they accepted the need for open rebellion. On the other hand there are in Germany a small and decreasing number of persons who cannot learn to face reality, and who are anxious once again to believe the warmed-up fairy-tale of 1918, the legend of 'the stab in the back': they ascribe our defeat to treachery, even now. Yet where in the world are there not fools, men who cannot see the most obvious facts, men to whom all experience teaches nothing whatsoever?

From this point of view the fatal decisions, described in this book by men who know of what they write, were not truly fatal: that is to say, they did not turn assured German victory into certain defeat. In view of the power relationships, the results of these various operations were more or less predetermined, the primary cause being a false appreciation of our abilities at the time when the decisions were taken. Even if the Luftwaffe had won the Battle of Britain, it was unlikely that Great Britain would be forced to her knees. The capture of Stalingrad or a timely withdrawal of the Sixth Army would hardly have resulted in a speedy collapse of Soviet resistance. The defeat of El Alamein in October and November of 1942 was inevitable in view of Rommel's shortage of supplies. And a victory in the Ardennes, at the moment when the curtain was about to be rung down, would have gained Hitler nothing save perhaps a little more time on earth. Even the defeat of the Normandy invasion, which was scarcely imaginable considering the Allies' overwhelming air and naval supremacy, would



hardly have prevented the British and Americans from launching new invasions.

The fundamental and truly fatal decision was the one which was based on Hitler's erroneous assumption that the Western Powers would permit Hitler to destroy Poland without intervening on the side of their ally. Once the decision to invade Poland had been taken, our destiny was sealed.

The lesson taught by the 1914–1918 war was repeated a quarter of a century later: Germany is not in a position to fight and win a war on more than one front. Today, God be praised, we have learned more than that. We have understood profounder truths. The German people is now sincerely anxious for a deep and final reconciliation with its former enemies. We have one fundamentally held belief, which is that we must never cross swords with our neighbours again. Let us compete with them, by all means, but only in the ways of peace. We lost the war: now our only battle is to win the affection and respect of our former foes. If all the civilized nations can together win the peace, then—and this is for us a consolation—the six million Germans who died on the battlefields, or in flight before the frenzied armies coming from the East, or beneath the bombs dropped upon our cities, will not have sacrificed their lives for their country in vain.

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